

Wutai jiemei (Stage Sisters)

舞台姐妹

directed by Xie Jin; Shanghai Tianma Film, 1965

This film is a product of Liu Shaoqi era in the mid-1960s, when China had left the Soviet block and had struck out on its own, attempting to redefine itself as a leader of the Third World and non-aligned nations. Unfortunately, it was produced on the eve of the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966-1969) and as a result was not actually released until after the political thaw of the late 1970s, when it won several international prizes.

Zhu Chunhua, the heroine, is a peasant girl sold as a child bride. She flees this forced marriage to join a traveling Shaoxing Opera (Yue ju) troupe. The music instructor's daughter, Xing Yuehong, takes a liking to her and the two become "sworn sisters". When the troupe performs in Shaoxing, a wealthy opera aficionado tries to extract sexual favors from Yuehong. After the troupe stands up to him, he induces the local police to bust up and ban the show on morals charges (having women perform on stage). In the ruckus that ensues when they try to apprehend Yuehong, Chunhua fights back, saving her. For this Chunhua herself is arrested and tied to a post, where she is exposed to the elements and public humiliation for three days. A younger peasant girl, also named Chunhua (Spring Flower) brings her water and encouragement during her ordeal. That much of the film's concerns have to do with stressing the need for solidarity among women becomes clear.

When Yuehong's father dies, Chunhua and Yuehong go to Shanghai, where their hard-earned excellence in acting leads to success and recognition. But when their new manager, Mr. Tang, asks Chunhua to play a more sexually suggestive role, she refuses. Eventually Yuehong (Red Moon) decides to marry Tang for financial security, though she admits to Chunhua that she does not love him. The two "sisters" begin to drift apart.

After the suicide of a fellow actress, Chunhua comes under the influence of Communist underground women activists and decides to act the lead role of Xiang Lin Sao in an operatic version (Yue ju) of Lu Xun's short story Zhufu (New Year's Sacrifice), which the Kuomintang authorities tell Tang to squelch. When he fails, he orders his underling Ah Gan to throw limestone into Chunhua's face, which outrages the public. The KMT authorities reluctantly hear the case in court. Tang persuades Yuehong to say she hired Ah Gan to commit the act out of professional rivalry, but Chunhua points out in the public trial that the act was politically motivated and orchestrated by Tang. Tang slinks off.

With the Communist victory in 1949, Tang flees to Taiwan, abandoning Yuehong, whom Chunhua encounters while playing the lead role in "The White Haired Girl" in Shaoxing. The sisters are reconciled. Although the film ends with them sitting side by side on a motor boat speeding forward, whether Yuehong will be welcomed back into the new Communist-led troupe is unresolved.

questions for discussion:

1. The film begins in 1936 and ends in 1949. What historical eras has China gone through in the process and how have women been effected?
2. Are there similarities between this film and "The World of Suzie Wong"?
3. What attracted Chunhua to play the role of Xiang Lin Sao in "The New Year's Sacrifice"?