

舞台姐妹 Wú-tái jiě-mèi (Stage Sisters)

from the International Dictionary of Films and Filmmakers - 1  
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When Xie Jin made *Two Stage Sisters* in 1964, it marked the culmination of a certain aesthetic thrust within post-1949 Chinese cinema. At this time, Xie Jin already had a reputation for making films with strong female protagonists and clearly revolutionary themes, including *Woman Basketball Player #5* (1957) and *The Women's Red Army Detachment* (1961). As a part of the first generation of filmmakers to come of age after the Revolution, Xie embarked on his career at a time when the new People's Republic of China was searching for self-identity outside as well as within the cinematic world. Blending elements of Hollywood melodrama, Soviet socialist realism, pre-war Chinese critical realism, and folk opera traditions, *Two Stage Sisters* can be looked at as an answer (particularly after the Sino-Soviet split in the late 1950's) to what a peculiarly Chinese socialist film should look like. Using the lives of women in an all-female Shaoxing opera troupe to represent the changes the Revolution brought, Xie Jin, working from an original script (unusual in an industry which still bases most of its productions on well-known literary works), also used the Shaoxing opera troupe as a way of exploring the tremendous aesthetic, cultural, and social changes that gripped modern China.

Covering the years 1935 through 1950, *Two Stage Sisters* focuses on the lives of two very different women. One, Chunhua (Xie Fang), is a young widow who runs away from her in-laws and finds sanctuary in the world of Shaoxing opera. The other, Yuehong (Cao Tindi), is born into that world. Both suffer the hardships of the life of itinerant performers. However, when they find themselves in Shanghai, Chunhua throws herself into her career and eventually into revolutionary politics, while Yuehong chooses a romance with their prosperous and ruthless theatrical manager. After 1949, both return to the countryside—Chunhua with a travelling Communist theatrical troupe and Yuehong to eke out a living after being abandoned by her husband. The film ends with the

✓ WUTAIJIEMEI. (Two Stage Sisters.)

China, 1964.

Director: Xie Jin. 謝晉 (b. 1923)

Production: Tianma Film Studio, Shanghai; color; running time: 114 minutes; length: 10,223 feet. Released 1964.

Production manager: Ding Li; screenplay: Lin Gu, Xu Jin, and Xie Jin; photography: Zhou Daming; editor: Zhang Liqun; sound recordist: Zhu Weigang; art director: Ge Schicheng, stage scenery: Xu Yunlong; music: Huang Zhun, music director: Chen Chuanxi.

Cast: Xie Fang (*Chunhua*); Cao Yindi (*Yuehong*); Feng Ji (*Xing*); Gao Yuansheng (*Jiang Bo*); Shen Fengjuan (*Xiao Xiang*); Xu Caigen (*Jin Shui*); Shangguan Yunzhu (*Shang Shuihua*); Ma Ji (*Qian Dukui*); Luo Zhengyi (*Yu Guiqing*); Wu Baifang (*Little Chunhua*); Li Wei (*Manager Tang*); Deng Nan (*Aixin*); Shen Hao (*Mrs. Shen*); Dong Lin (*Ni*); Ding Ran (*Pan*).

Publications:

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Wutai Jiemei

sisters' reunion; however, the fate of Yuehong remains somewhat uncertain despite the film's generally optimistic resolution.

In spite of the extremely positive view of revolutionary change the film puts forward, however, *Two Stage Sisters* was suppressed during the Cultural Revolution and only really came to the screen in the late 1970's. The reasons behind this range from the personal displeasure of Jiang Qing (Madame Mao—then in power as head of "The Gang of Four") with one of the advisors on the film to its condemnation as "bourgeois" for incorporating characters which were neither "good" nor "bad" vis-à-vis the Revolution (e.g., Yuehong) and thus opening the text to ambiguous readings. Unfortunately, looking at *Two Stage Sisters* as some sort of veiled statement against either Mao or the Revolution misses the point. The film really must be taken as a contribution to the construction of socialist film aesthetics in China, even though it represents a very different path than that taken by Madame Mao in her support for the highly stylized "model opera."

*Two Stage Sisters* represents an eclectic aesthetic which blends the critical vigor of the "golden era" of left-wing filmmaking of 1930's Shanghai with the "revolutionary romanticism" of the arts that developed in Yanan, where the Chinese Communist Party had a stronghold during World War II. Like many earlier Shanghai films, *Two Stage Sisters* has a Hollywood flavor. After all, it deals with the occasionally glamorous world of the opera stage and the lives of its charismatic stars. Also, like its Shanghai predecessors, the film has a critical realist's eye for the gritty details of urban life. From Yanan, however, *Two Stage Sisters* takes its heroic elevation of ordinary people through the revolutionary process, its interest in folk-life and folk aesthetics, and an often ethereal, fairytale-like quality which comes from a blend of these folk roots with political idealism. To all this, the sobriety of the historical moment, an interest in looking at the nature of class oppression, feudal gender relations, nationalism, and the Japanese occupation within a dialectical framework grounds *Two Stage Sisters* within the tradition of its better known Soviet cinematic cousins. Its epic sweep from the poor villages of Zhejiang province to the grandeur of the Shanghai opera stage puts it within a tradition of epic socialist dramas made in other post-revolutionary societies.

However, *Two Stage Sisters* seems to add up to more than the sum of its aesthetic parts. Perhaps this is due to the elaborate mirror structure of the film which uses the world of the stage as an aesthetic reflection of the changes taking place in the lives of the film's characters. The Shaoxing opera stage, for example, represents an inverse reflection of the feudal world of the countryside. Whereas the stage features stories of warrior heroines and romances between beautiful ladies and young scholars, the actual conditions the actresses live in show a world of poverty, oppression, and constant humiliation at the hands of men.

In Shanghai, *Two Stage Sisters* shows a different kind of opera emerging. Based on the work of the radical author Lu Xun, this new opera goes outside the realm of highly stylized heroines and the fantasy of romance to deal with the poor and the homeless. Decidedly anti-romantic, it features the gritty, everyday world of contemporary Chinese life.

Lastly, *Two Stage Sisters* features opera after the Revolution with a snippet from *The White-Haired Girl*, perhaps the best-known revolutionary play to emerge from Yanan. It has the folkloric roots of Shaoxing and the critical sensibilities of Lu Xun blended together within a fantasy which features an everyday woman who becomes a revolutionary heroine.

All three of these aesthetic traditions are self-consciously represented in *Two Stage Sisters*. They serve as markers of historical change. They also allow the viewer a certain ironic distance from the drama to stand back and place the film's fiction within a broader political and cultural context. However, more than simply documenting aesthetic and social changes by incorporating these opera allusions, *Two Stage Sisters* chronicles its own aesthetic roots, giving the viewer a rare glimpse of the history behind Chinese film aesthetics of the mid-1960's. It is as a document of this unique Chinese socialist cinematic sensibility that *Two Stage Sisters* is particularly important to an understanding of Chinese film culture as well as socialist cinema aesthetics generally.

—Gina Marchetti