

Director: Xie Jin, starring Liu Qiong; Shanghai Film Studio

Mr. Xu, a billionaire Chinese businessman from America, returns to mainland China around 1979 to "see the motherland again" and, at the same time, to locate his eldest son (by his first marriage), whom he has not seen in 30 years. While they are staying in the Peking Hotel, the billionaire's female secretary, who is supposed to be a Chinese-American, asks a representative of the Chinese government for help in this. Soon the son, Xu Lingjun, now a teacher in the grasslands of northwest China, is on his way to Peking by plane from Lanzhou. Not long after they are reunited, it becomes clear that there is some tension between them. Lingjun feels that his father abandoned him and his mother, who died just days after Mr. Xu left for America with another woman. His father mouths the communist slogan "Wang qian kan!" (Let's look toward the future [and not dwell on the past]), which seems to irritate Lingjun because he does not believe his father understands the context in which this is meant.

Through a series of flashbacks, interspersed with scenes of his father and the private secretary spending large sums of money on lavish dinners and souvenirs, we are gradually introduced to Lingjun's life over the last thirty years: how he initially thrived as an orphan under socialism, what a good education he received from the state and his many sincere teachers, how all this evaporated during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution, when he was labeled a rightist because his father was a capitalist who lived in America, how he was "sent down" to the countryside as a form of exile and how the people in the grasslands, most of whom were herders, took him in and made him feel at home, how they "gave" him a wife (a girl fifteen years his junior who had fled famine in Sichuan), and how he came to love her after their marriage.

As Lingjun's father gets to know him better, he realizes that the son has real strength of character, unlike his foppish half-brother and flighty half-sister, who have grown up in the States. This makes him all the more eager to take Lingjun back to America and train him to take over the family business, a chemical plant in the San Francisco bay area. When the father decides his son is a Marxist, having grown up in China, he even tries to make the West sound appealing from that angle, telling him: "Abroad they study Marxism too, and probably do a better job of studying it there than here..." but Lingjun replies: "There they are only studying it. Here we live it."

Finally the father offers to bring Lingjun's wife and son over as well, but Lingjun replies: "Perhaps if you had come five years ago I would have agreed to go, but now the situation in China has changed. Now I can live up to my potential here and make real contributions to society." His father can only give him an expensive watch to take back to the grasslands for his wife.

Lingjun tries to refuse, saying: "She cannot use such an expensive watch there." Thinking of the difference between the two societies, or even of the difference between Peking and the grasslands, there is a disturbing grain of truth to what he says. Lingjun sees his father and the personal secretary off at the airport, then returns home to the land of the herdsmen.

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questions:

1. Why do you think the herdsmen protected Lingjun during the Cultural Revolution?
2. Do you think Lingjun's choice is a realistic one or not? Why?
3. Is this film plausible?