

芙蓉鎮

Fúróng zhèn (lit. Hibiscus Town; also translated as: A Small Town Called Hibiscus), Shanghai Film Studio

date: 1986

director: Xie Jin

original novel: Gu Hua

screenplay: [Zhong] Ah Cheng, Xie Jin

cast (partial): Liu Xiaoqing (as Hu Yuying), Jiang Wen (Qin Shutian/Qin "Dianzi"), Zhang Zaishi (Gu Yanshan/Director Gu)

The film begins in 1963. Hu Yuying and her husband Guigui operate an outdoor restaurant which sells doufu (beancurd). They are doing well under the new economic policy implemented by Liu Shaoqi, then Chairman of the PRC (but later branded "the chief person in authority taking the capitalist road" during the Cultural Revolution) which allows for small businesses run on a limited scale. The community also appreciates the service they provide. They are planning to adopt a child as soon as they move into their new house. At the same time they are celebrating their connubial bliss by hosting a party for the whole town, Communist Party Section Chief Li approaches the town by sampan. She is espied by Wang Qiushe, a "land reform activist" (i.e. a local Party do-be), who rushes to welcome her. When she pays an unexpected visit to his home, however, he rushes to hide his statue of the Guanyin (Avalokitesvara, aka the Buddhist "Goddess of Mercy") in order not to appear superstitious.

A man carrying a gong marches through the town proclaiming: "A Movement! A Movement [i.e. a political purge] is Here!" This marks the beginning of the Socialist Education Movement, direct precursor to the "Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution" (1966-1969/78). As the movement gets underway, Section Chief Li targets the doufu seller, her husband, and Director Gu, who had been supplying them with unwanted surplus foodstuffs.

Hu Yuying flees, entrusting a sum of 1,500 yuan (legally obtained profits from the business) to a relative in the Party, whose wife then forces him to betray Hu. When Hu Yuying finally returns home, having found no permanent refuge elsewhere, she is told that her husband, Guigui, has been shot when he tried to kill the Party Section Chief for tormenting him and others.

Yuying is sentenced to sweep the streets with Qin "Dianzi" (Madman Qin), an intellectual branded as a rightist because he wrote a play supposedly "with an anti-feudal theme which was intended as a satire on [the dictatorship of] the Party." Such works were originally encouraged by the Party during the short-lived campaign for liberalization in 1957 known as the Baihua qifang or Hundred Flowers Campaign, named after a quotation from Mao Zedong: "Let a hundred

flowers bloom, let a hundred schools of thought contend." Yuying falls in love with him after he nurses her back to health during a sickness. When they discover that she is pregnant, they petition for permission to marry, which at first seems possible while the town is temporarily under Wang Qiushe, a zany rebel leader at the high point of the chaos during the Cultural Revolution, but is then denied them after Section Chief Li returns. She has Qin sent to prison for ten years.

In 1979, after the Cultural Revolution and the so-called "Gang of Four" era are over, Qin meets Section Chief Li on a ferry boat as they are both returning to Hibiscus Town. She attempts to apologize to him, since the Cultural Revolution has now been denounced by the new national leader Deng Xiaoping, himself a victim of its excesses. Qin accepts her apology only with great irony in his speech. Finally, when she asks if she can do anything for him, he says: "Just leave the people alone. They get by easily enough on their own, but sometimes [someone makes it] not so easy [for them]..."

Back in Hibiscus Town, after a tearful reunion with Hu Yuying and his small son, Qin and Hu see a man with a gong, this time Wang Qiushe, now insane, walking through the town crying: "Movement! [We Need Another Political Campaign] -- Again!" The crowd are obviously displeased, but Qin and Hu give him a bowl of doufu to assuage his hunger and he walks off he crying: "Movement! A Movement's Here Again!" They reflect that only the people can guard against such a movement's return.

questions for discussion:

1. How does this depiction of the Cultural Revolution differ from the depiction of the leftist/Maoist line in the 1975 film Juelie (Breaking With Old Ideas)?

2. Do you see physical resemblances between characters in this film and political figures in the China of the Cultural Revolution?

-- CP Section Chief Li looks a bit like a younger version Mao's wife Jiang Qing, associated with the radical faction in the Cultural Revolution.

3. What are the political implications of the two final scenes?