

Iron and Silk (USA 1991)

Starring Mark Salzman (who plays himself)

Screenplay is based on the book by the same title by Mark Salzman. Salzman majored in Chinese at Yale and taught English in Changsha, Hunan 1982-1984.

Director: Shirley Sun

Shirley Sun is a Chinese-American, former academician (PhD diss. in Fine Arts at Stanford on Lu Xun and the Woodcut Movement), who turned to movie making in the mid-1980s. I met her with the late British journalist David Bonavia in Beijing circa 1984 when she was working on her first major film "A Great Wall" (called Beijing gushi in Chinese).

The narrator tells us he went to China after College. He had identified with the heroes in Mandarin-speaking martial arts films from Hong Kong he saw in the US because the heroes were small of stature, like himself, always beat the bad guys and got the girl at the end. The film then begins with street scenes in China, somewhat chaotic but slow and non-threatening.

When he arrives at the school at which he is to teach English to former teachers of the Russian-language, he is told to sit alone at his own, albeit nice, table and everyone in the school cafeteria stares at him. He makes them laugh by venturing a "Ni hao!" and then performing Kung Fu moves for the audience, who applaud at the end of his "performance." The narrator then philosophizes to the film's audience that Kung Fu is an attitude to be employed in all things one does -- to have a skill that transcends surface beauty. He then poses the question: "What would it be [worth] to have a teacher who could lead you to that sort of mystery?"

Then he meets with that sort of teacher, Pan Laoshi, a man nicknamed "Iron Fist". But Pan puts him off, asking "Ni neng chi ku ma?" (Can you take suffering?) with the implication, in Mark's mind at least, that he is a soft American who cannot. His calligraphy teacher, a widow surnamed Hei (Black) Laoshi tells him: "You are too impatient [in calligraphy and other things]." He meets, by chance in a library after hours, a woman named Ming who tells him her hobby is reading English novels. She likes Steinbeck, whom Mark also praises, without going into any details about why (Steinbeck was a socialist who wrote about the oppressed in America during the 1930s). Ming was trained as a physician, but spent two years tending pigs during the Cultural Revolution (two wasted years, she says with great indignation).

Mark muses that nothing in China is simple, especially nothing as simple as happiness. He goes out on a lake with Ming and later waxes poetic about the character for her name: (It combines the brightness of the sun with that of the moon). She is always in a hurry, as though she has no time to lose, he tells himself. They watch an operatic performance of "Ballad of the White Snake" (Baishe zhuan). He asks if the male protagonist loves White Snake, she replies in the affirmative, but adds: "She's a spirit, so they can never be together." She later says: "In China it's everybody's business" [who someone sees] and adds "I live in a very different world from you." "No I can't [kiss you], I can't do anything, I can't."

Teacher Pan, the Kung Fu master, finally convinced of his sincerity, takes him on as a student. He is often depicted as teaching at a desk with a backdrop of huge pictures of Lenin, Marx, Engels and Mao. One of his more mature students says to him after class: "What will happen to her when you leave China?" and another says: "I can only kiss my 10 and 12 year old daughters at night after they are asleep, because otherwise this would embarrass them." In another scene she says: "I can't leave China, my family needs me." The anti-spiritual pollution campaign starts (Fall 1983). He is barred from visiting his Kung Fu teacher's work unit. In answer to a dare from some toughs, he punches a hole in a wall. One of the school authorities threatens: "Foreigners who destroy property

here will be punished according to Chinese law." (harking back to the unequal treaties and extrajurisdiction).

He tells his calligraphy teacher Hei he can't take being excluded as a foreigner any more. "I didn't come here for this." She tells him her husband was an artist who did ink drawings and died in prison during the Cultural Revolution "because his drawings were too dark". She then takes him to a temple and says "Buddha was a foreigner, too, but we made him our own. You are a foreigner, it is true, but you can make wushu your own." Pan teaches him all the more just to defy the authorities. He asks Ming what she will do when he leaves China. She says she'll stay in her room and read. "In my imagination I can do many things." He picks her up at a bus stop on his bike and as they say farewell she tells him: "At the end of the bridge I'll get off. Now go as fast as you can."

Mark has a farewell match against his teacher. Pan Laoshi says: "I have not lost face" (i.e. I taught you well). He gives him what looks like a new sword and tells him to take it back to America and use it to train more good pupils. The customs authorities try to confiscate it as a guobao (national treasure), but are impressed by the way he wields it in a demonstration. His calligraphy teacher, always the avatar of proper etiquette, sees him off alone to the train station.

questions:

1. Why does the protagonist go to China? Is he searching for something? (At one point he says he's looking for something he couldn't find in America)?
2. What does the protagonist find?
3. What other motivations might one have to go to China?
4. What generations are represented in the film ?
5. Is it possible that Mark's age (20-22) and lack of shared experiences makes it less easy for him to communicate with his Chinese friends, associates and teachers. According to Ming's own chronology, we have to guess she is 28-32. How old might teachers Hei and Pan be? What have they all been through that he has not?