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Two Stage Sisters

(CHINESE-COLOR)

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A Tianma Film Studio production. Directed by Xie Jin. Screenplay, Lin Gu, Xu Jin, Xie Jin; camera (uncredited color), Zhou Daming; editor, Zhang Liqun; music, Huang Zhun; sound, Zhu Weigang. Reviewed at the Preview House, L.A., April 6, 1981. (No MPAA Rating). Running time: 114 MINS.

Features: Xie Fang, Cao Yindi, Feng Ji, Gao Yuansheng.

(Chinese with English subtitles)

With the exception of a revolutionary opera or two (and "The Opium Wars"), virtually no films from the People's Republic of China have been seen in the U.S. since 1949, so "Two Stage Sisters," a melodrama from 1964, holds considerable curiosity value for domestic followers of international cinema. After pic's successful initial release, the Cultural Revolution brought all production to a halt, and most of those involved with this film were punished due to alleged bourgeois slant of the material. With recent improvement in diplomatic and cultural relations, pic's Yank debut represents a hopeful first step towards further exposure to Chinese product. Happily, it also possesses some artistic merit beyond that of an historical relic.

Somewhat resembling several Japanese films with theatrical settings, story spans 15 years in the relationship of two young actresses. As a way of eluding authorities, one girl joins a group of traveling players and soon develops a close, sisterly, friendship with the daughter of troupe's manager.

After the manager's death, the young women go to Japanese-occupied Shanghai in 1941 and quickly become well-regarded thespis. By 1944, however, a rift occurs, with one coming under the influence of corrupt, western-style gangster types and the other beginning to display revolutionary awareness. U.S.-connected villains force the former woman to betray and attack the latter and it all ends up in court as the two former friends confront each other and agonizingly let the truth come out.

Tale then jumps to the revolutionary China of 1950, when performers have "the biggest stage" of peasants, workers and soldiers on which to play. One actress tracks down the other in the provinces and, after their emotional, remorseful reunion, pair makes a joint resolve in a classic final line — "Let us remold ourselves and always perform revolutionary operas."

Last section is fortunately the only one with overt political content, as all that comes before plays as respectable, reasonably complex drama sparked by occasional

(Continued on page 24)

Two Stage Sisters

stylistic flourishes from director Xie Jin. Film is a mix of excellent location lensing and highly atmospheric interiors, and the pace is somewhat quicker than that found in most Japanese films, the only Asian cinema known to western audiences aside from Hong Kong actioners.

Technical standards are up to those found practically anywhere else in the world, acting is solid if a bit earnest, and the telling is not without wit. One irritant is lack of subtitles to translate stage performances, newspaper inserts and explanatory titles. Only aspects that could remotely be considered "reactionary" are the unquestioning devotion to the form of traditional melodrama and a scenario overpopulated by non-political characters. Long in official disfavor, director Xie Jin is currently working again at the Shanghai Studios.

In all, film is an interesting item definitely worthy of a slot in other fests and proper cultural outlets.

—Cart.