

Document Citation

Title	Good men, good women
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Source	<i>Variety</i>
Date	1995 Jun 04
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	57, 60
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Hao nan hao nu (Good men, good women), Hou Hsiao-Hsien,, 1995

GOOD MEN, GOOD WOMEN

(HAO NAN HAO NU)

(JAPANESE-TAIWANESE)

A Team Okuyama presentation of a 3H Films production, in association with Painted Face Communication Corp., Chang Shu Prods. and Fukien Film Studio. (International sales: Shochiku, Japan.) Produced by Katsuhiko Mizuno, Shozo Ichiyama, King Jieh-wen, Ben Hsieh. Executive producers, Kazuyoshi Okuyama, Yang Teng-kuei.

Directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien. Screenplay, Chu Tien-wen, from the play by Chiang Bi-yu, Lan Bo-chow. Camera (color), Chen Hwai-en; editor, Liao Ching-song; music, Chen, Chiang Hsiao-wen; art direction, Huang Wen-ying, Lu Ming-chin, Ho Hsien-ko; costume design, Huang, Juan Pei-yun, Lu Li-chin; sound (Dolby), Tu Du-che, Phil Heywood, Ron Purvis; associate producer, Jan Hung-tze; line producer, Chang Hua-fu; assistant director, Hong Che-yu; casting, King. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 21, 1995. Running time: 108 MIN.

Liang Ching/

Chiang Bi-yu Annie Shizuka Inoh
Chung Hao-tung Lim Giong
Ah-wei Jack Kao
Liang Ching's Sister Vicky Wei
Liang Ching's

Brother-in-Law King Jieh-wen
Ah-nan Tsai Chen-nan
Hsiao Dao-ying/

Mrs. Hsiao Lu Li-chin
Lee Nan-feng Kao Ming
(Hokkien, Mandarin, Cantonese and Japanese dialogue)

Billed by the director as showing "the true color and energies of men and women" that remain constant across changing eras, Hou Hsiao-hsien's "Good Men, Good Women" is another deeply felt humanist meditation wrapped up in a puzzle package. More general in its messages than his 1993 "The Puppetmaster" but equally perverse in its parceling out of information, pic will ring bells with admirers of the Taiwanese helmer but pass by those not on his wavelength. Fest exposure is a given, but actual wicket chances look as modest as the previous pic's, despite its more manageable length.

Scripted by Hou regular Chu Tien-wen from a legit original, picture is inspired by the true-life story of crusading couple Chiang Bi-yu (who died recently at age 74) and Chung Hao-tung (executed by

Taiwan's authorities in October 1950). Their story is visualized by an actress, Liang Ching, as she awaits start of shooting on a biopic and runs scenes from the script through her mind.

Movie operates in three time frames, all of which are intro'd (without explanation) in the opening reel. In the early '90s, Liang (Japanese singer Annie Shizuka Inoh) is shown holed up in her Taiwan apartment where an unknown caller starts faxing her pages from her stolen diary. Initial entries recall her affair in the late '80s — the movie's second time period — with gangster Ah-wei (Jack Kao) when she was a bar hostess hooked on drugs and sex. Third level, sparked by scenes of Liang rehearsing, consists of B&W extracts from the yet-to-roll pic, which narrates the story of Chiang (Inoh) and Chung (Lim Giong) in linear style. Extracts include a voiceover filling in the story's gaps.

The pair decided to go to China (from Japan, where Chung was a medical student) during WWII to join the anti-Japanese resistance. Arrested in Guangdong (Canton) province on suspicion of being spies for the Japanese, they subsequently set up an emergency hospital. Chiang has her baby adopted so she can carry on her work. After the war, they move to Taiwan and form a left-wing group opposed to the ruling KMT government. Chiang is eventually released but Chung is executed as part of the general anti-Marxist fervor inspired by the Korean War and the United States' use of Taiwan as a front-line anti-Communist stronghold.

Woven between the "movie" clips are the continuing stories from the late '80s and early '90s. In the former, Liang is shown on a downward spiral caused by drugs and alcohol as she consorts with Ah-wei and Taiwan's criminal underworld. In the latter, still pestered by faxes from her stolen diary, she identifies herself more and more with the long-suffering Chiang, her character in the pic. In an echo of her earlier self, she's accused by her elder sis (Vicky Wei, lead in the Hou-produced "Heartbreak Island") of dallying with her husband, who's also not above illegal business deals.

The picture's overriding theme, which connects the characters of all three levels, is simple and traditional: Men are generally the catalysts of events (but pay the highest price) while women live on to wit-

Turn to page 60

GOOD MEN, GOOD WOMEN

Continued from page 57

ness the results (but bear the pain). The darker message is that earlier struggles were for nationhood and political principles, whereas now they're for real estate and fast coin.

In a narrative style Hou has pursued since the late '80s, relationships and identities are only gradually revealed, with most of the pieces clicking into place only after about an hour. In terms of information revealed, it's almost a film made in reverse: Only at the very end, for example, in a voiceover over the identical opening shot, are details of the film and its title, "Good Men, Good Women," revealed. In that respect, pic will be a very different experience on subsequent viewings, when auds will start with full knowledge of what's what and who's who.

Those with some knowledge of recent East Asian history will find the movie an easier ride first time out, but Hou doesn't make many concessions even to specialists. Though lenser Chen Hwai-en makes striking visual use of light and shade, faces are often hard to make out, further confusing the issue. It's a pic that requires the viewer's full attention.

Pacing is fractionally brisker than in recent Hou pix, partly thanks to the multi-pronged narrative, though helmer still goes for long takes with minimal camera movement. Editing has clearly been ruthless, to judge from several scenes featured in the press book that don't show up onscreen. Performances are muted and low-key, though Inoh is amazingly versatile in her three roles as the devoted Chiang, lowlife Liang and quieter present-day actress. Lim, a popular Taiwan rock singer who played the young puppetmaster in Hou's previous movie, is OK, though somewhat ill-defined as Chung.

Aside from some not-so-pure B&W in the movie extracts, tech credits are excellent, with Dolby Stereo (recorded in Sydney, Australia) deployed with verve. Film is dedicated at end to the real-life couple and "all the political victims of the '50s."

—Derek Elley



TIME TRAVELERS: Annie Shizuka Inoh, left, and Lim Giong star in "Good Men, Good Women," which unfolds in three time periods.