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# NEW YORKER FILMS

*Presents*



Zhang Yimou, the magnificent director of **Ju Dou**, **Raise the Red Lantern** and *To Live*, recreates the opulent, treacherous world of 1930's Shanghai, replete with mob wars, gilded pleasure palaces and sexual intrigues. A "country cousin" of the local godfather is called to serve as factotum to Jewel (the incomparable Gong Li), reigning queen of afterhours Shanghai and not incidentally the godfather's mistress. Not since Marlene Dietrich donned her top hat and tails has there been such a nightclub femme fatale as Jewel; she may hold the keys to power in her hands -- and might even use them.

—The 33rd New York Film Festival

**RUNNING TIME: 109 MINS. COLOR. IN MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES. RATED R.**



## A Mob Story in Another Place and Time

By KEVIN THOMAS  
TIMES STAFF WRITER

**Z**HANG YIMOU's "Shanghai Triad," a great gangster film, evokes the most exciting, glamorous, dangerous, cruel and corrupt city on Earth during the 1930s. What Chicago was to the United States in the '20s, Shanghai was to China the following decade.

The city was a magnet for European and U.S. exploitation and for Japanese aggression, a decadent society teetering on the abyss. Visually and structurally "Triad" is as striking as "Casino," but its characters are as involving as director Martin Scorsese's are not.

We view Shanghai's famous Bund, a shoreline row of vintage Western-style skyscrapers, through the eyes of a bright, tenacious 14-year-old boy, Shuisheng (capable, poised Wang Xiaoxiao), freshly arrived from the country. In the course of one week he will be introduced to cigarette lighters, telephones and ice cream and also the full range of human behavior, ranging from unspeakably savage ruthlessness to a selfless concern for others.

Shuisheng's uncle (Li Xuejian), a loyal soldier of the second tier to the city's leading underworld kingpin, Mr. Tang (Li Baotian), has summoned the boy to serve his boss' gorgeous mistress Xiao Jinbao (Gong Li), who also is the lead singer in an insipid revue at Tang's nightclub. The obsequious, bowing and scraping uncle assures Mr. Tang that the boy is "a third nephew of a close cousin," for the gang leader trusts only members of his own clan.

Shuisheng has been abruptly thrust into a world of overwhelming luxury: Tang lives in an Art Deco palace with some interiors done in an overblown Beaux Arts style. He has given Xiao Jinbao a darkly paneled English-style mansion done up in similar gangster-

style elegance. Although his uncle demands that he be obediently grateful, Shuisheng simply wants to go home and with good reason: Xiao Jinbao is a veritable Dragon Lady, a hard, petty tyrant of limited singing talent and boundless arrogance and nastiness. It comes to us as no shock when Shuisheng discovers that she is two-timing her elderly protector with his handsome, ambitious young No. 2 man Song (Sun Chun).

On only his third day in Shanghai, Shuisheng's life is turned upside down by a St. Valentine's Day-like massacre, staged silhouette-style by Zhang behind the frosted doors of Tang's entrance foyer. Abruptly, Tang whisks his mistress, bejeweled and befurred, and her servant boy off to a remote island.

"Shanghai Triad" is one of the lush-looking, most stunningly photographed (by Lu Yue) films of the year, but its depiction of the unabashed material splendor is instantly eclipsed by the natural beauty of this island retreat with its swaying pampas grass, magnificent skies and modest structures of simple beauty. (No less important is Zhang Guangtian's poignant, lyrical score, an effective counterpoint to an underworld saga.)

Left mainly to Shuisheng for company, Xiao Jinbao begins to reveal another self, a woman who has made others miserable out of her resentment toward her own misery as an ultimately helpless pawn to men, a onetime country girl who realizes that Shanghai is a snare that can become hell on Earth.

She comes to treat Shuisheng kindly and to express tenderness to an adorable little girl, the daughter of a woman who lives on the island and is acting as her servant. In this deliberately stylized film -- as stylized as his "Red Sorghum," "Ju Dou" and "Raise the Red Lantern" -- Zhang has created a Garden of Eden in this earthly paradise. But how long will it prove to be a refuge for Xiao Jinbao?

Those who view movies in terms of



Gong Li in "Shanghai Triad"

politics first and art second can take the film as an indictment of the materialist West. But Zhang's vision is more universal, more profound, and his film is a cautionary tale on the dangers of materialism, regardless of cultural origin, as it affects the spiritual life of a contemporary China experiencing escalating economic expansion. (Curiously, Zhang did not point out the role of the underworld in the rise of Chiang Kai-shek -- and vice versa.)

The impact of the violence in the seductive world Zhang has created is all the stronger for being presented with such discretion. Likewise, Li Baotian's Tang is a great deal scarier than Joe Pesci in "Casino," for his cruelty is combined with a refined wit and civility. As for Gong Li, it is the seventh performance for Zhang in a collaboration as remarkable as that of Marlene Dietrich and Josef von Sternberg, who also made seven pictures together.

Now that Gong Li and Zhang Yimou have gone their separate ways we can only hope that "Shanghai Triad" is not their last film together. But if it is, it's a grand valedictory.

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