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ZHANG'S 'TRIAD' A TRIUMPH

CANNES

SHANGHAI TRIAD

(YAO A YAO YAO
DAO WAIPO QIAO)

(CHINESE-FRENCH)

A Sony Pictures Classics (U.S.) release of a Shanghai Film Studios (China)/Alpha Films, UGC Images, La Sept Cinema (France) production, with cooperation of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs. (International sales: UGC, Paris.) Produced by Jean-Louis Piel. UGC producer, Yves Marmion. Shanghai Film Studios producer, Wu Yigong. Executive producers, Wang Wei, Zhu Yongde.

Directed by Zhang Yimou. Screenplay, Bi Feiyu, freely adapted from the novel "Men gum" (Gang Law) by Li Xiao. Camera (color), Lu Yue; editor, Du Yuan; music, Zhang Guangtian; art direction, Cao Jiuping; costume design, Tong Huamiao; sound (Dolby), Tao Jing; literary adviser, Wang Bin. Reviewed at Cannes Film Festival (competing), May 23, 1995. Running time: 108 MIN.

Xiao Jinbao (Bijou) Gong Li
Tang, the Triad Boss Li Baotian
Uncle Liu Li Xuejian
Song,
the No. 2 Shun Chun Shuisheng
Boy Wang Xiaoxiao Cuihua
Widow Jiang Baoying
(Mandarin Chinese dialogue)

In its bold take on a subgenre that's every bit as resonant as '30s U.S. gangster pix, Zhang Yimou's seventh feature is as assured and attention-grabbing as his 1988 bow, "Red Sorghum." Poised somewhere between the visual flamboyance of that movie and the interior tension of the later "Raise the Red Lantern," "Triad" oozes a confidence that carries the viewer almost without pause to its shocking climax and ironic close. Pic may meet some resistance from auds expecting Zhang's usual fare, but strong reviews and word of mouth should translate into a warm reception in upscale halls.

The picture — a stylized but gripping portrait of mob power play and lifestyles in 1930 Shanghai — went through a tortuous production history, sparked by the uproar over Zhang's "To Live" competing last year at Cannes without Peking's official "permission." With Zhang temporarily banned from making off-shore-funded pix, "Triad" was officially reclassified as a local production for filming to proceed.

The script, originally a straightforward version of Li Xiao's novel "Gang Law," also went through various changes. Those included



SONGBIRD: Gong Li is Xiao, a singer and the mistress of a gangster, in Zhang Yimou's 1930s-set "Shanghai Triad."

actress Gong Li's role being beefed up, a change of perspective in which events are viewed through the eyes of a young kid, and even a new Chinese title to reflect the different approach. The singsong title is the first two lines of a traditional Chinese lullaby, vaguely equivalent to "rock-a-bye baby."

Final film is very different from the expected Shanghai shooter saga and, by venturing into new pastures after tilling the "ethnic drama" field to the limit, Zhang ups the ante among fellow Chinese filmmakers with a vengeance.

Covering eight days in the fortunes of Shanghai's most powerful triad, yarn starts with the arrival from the countryside of young Tang Shuisheng (Wang Xiaoxiao), a naive member of the Tang clan who's placed under the care of Uncle Liu (Li Xuejian).

In his first day, Shuisheng sees almost every aspect of the closed, violent world — from a gang execution in a warehouse, through a visit to the family's nightclub where songbird Xiao (Gong), mistress of the triad boss (Li Baotian), is strutting her stuff, to a

tour of the boss's mansion during a major gang powwow, and finally to the house where Xiao lives and Shuisheng is to work.

This opening seg (at 34 minutes, the longest of all) lays out the plan for the boy's future and ends with the revelation that the boss's No. 2, the handsome and ambitious Song

Xiao, the kid and some trusted aides.

When Boss Tang announces on day seven, "We've got guests coming," the stage is set for the final cataclysmic few hours in young Shuisheng's first week inside a Shanghai triad.

By stripping down the novel and having many of the major events witnessed by the kid, Zhang immediately creates a distilled version of gangster-riddled Shanghai that's far from the usual in-your-face crimers of the period.

The script's boldest move is to go for a seemingly lopsided approach that makes big production numbers out of events that have little bearing on the main storyline. Though it's an unusual approach to a strongly narrative genre like the gangster film, Zhang is more interested in emotional texture. As in Greek tragedies, all the important events are actually taking place offstage — as we finally learn with a wallop at the end.

Thanks to tight framing, and the movie's overall color scheme — which moves between lustrous reds and golds for the Shanghai high life, to colder blues and blacks for its darker side — there's rarely any loss of tension. Only in the second half, during some of the rural moments, does the movie start to lose some of its tautness.

In her seventh and possibly final movie for Zhang — following the couple's breakup in February — Gong more than holds her own as the tramp-cum-singer. Directly aping acting styles of the period, and sporting a wardrobe that's tacky in the best possible way, she's every inch the hick-turned-minor-talent moll. Gong's own vocals of the songs tread a clever line between attractiveness and ama-

Zhang Yimou's film is very different from the expected Shanghai shooter saga, and ups the ante among fellow Chinese filmmakers with a vengeance.

(Shun Chun), is having a hotsy affair with bitch-on-wheels Xiao.

Over the next couple of days, this rigorously controlled world is shown to be as shaky as some of Xiao's onstage crooning. Outwardly poised and arrogant, Xiao gives violent vent to her childish frustrations late at night. When Boss Tang's house is hit one night by rival Fat Yu's mob, the boss flees to the country along with

teurism.

Starting slow but coming through strong in the final reels, experienced thesp Li Baotian is tops as the quiet, gentlemanly but utterly ruthless triad boss. Li Xuejian also scores in his crucial early role as the subservient but acid-tongued lackey Uncle Liu.

Pic is technically excellent, from its aforementioned lensing to some head-turning use of Dolby stereo.

—Derek Elley