

Document Citation

Title	Dying breeds
Author(s)	Michael Atkinson Michael Atkinson
Source	<i>Village Voice</i>
Date	1998 Apr 21
Type	review
Language	English English
Pagination	72
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Chinese box, Wang, Wayne, 1997

VILLAGE VOICE
4/21/98 p.72

Dying Breeds

Wayne Wang's *Chinese Box* evokes Hong Kong and its delivery to Chinese rule as a soul-

aching millennial metaphor, and as a scorching millennial metaphors HK ain't bad—less garishly horrifying than Bosnia, more fashionably off-the-West than Kuwait, and more problematic of capitalistic apocalypse in New York or L.A. Recombining acts of *Sans Soleil*, *Tokyo-Ga*, and *The Kid of Suzie Wong*, Wang's movie is a rueful meditation on drama, though it has enough tragic corn to be a Ross Hunter movie. (Wang cleared of Paul Auster this time, writing instead postcolonialist exotica.)

Paul Theroux and Jean-Claude Carrière to come up with the story.) Superficially sophisticated though it might be, *Chinese Box* is also superbly assured filmmaking, thrumming with visual intelligence; if at times the movie dawdles with contrived literary rather than having a coherent story, at least it dawdles beautifully.

Wang is an HK native, but that doesn't encourage him to center his saga on an Asian. Instead, we have a terrible (with cancer) and terminally jaded journalist Jeremy Irons wandering through the crisis-fraught city's alleyways wondering What It All Means, taping his broken-by-Gong Li heart by videotaping a portrait of the town, actually choosing Maggie Cheung's faded street urchin as a walking pool of HK's orphaned commerce. Portents fly thick as hailstones (a love that butchered fish with the beating heart), and Irons's mar-

Chinese Box
Directed by Wayne Wang
Written by Jean-Claude Carrière
and Larry Gross, from a story by
Carrière, Wang, and Paul Theroux
A Trimark release
Opens April 17

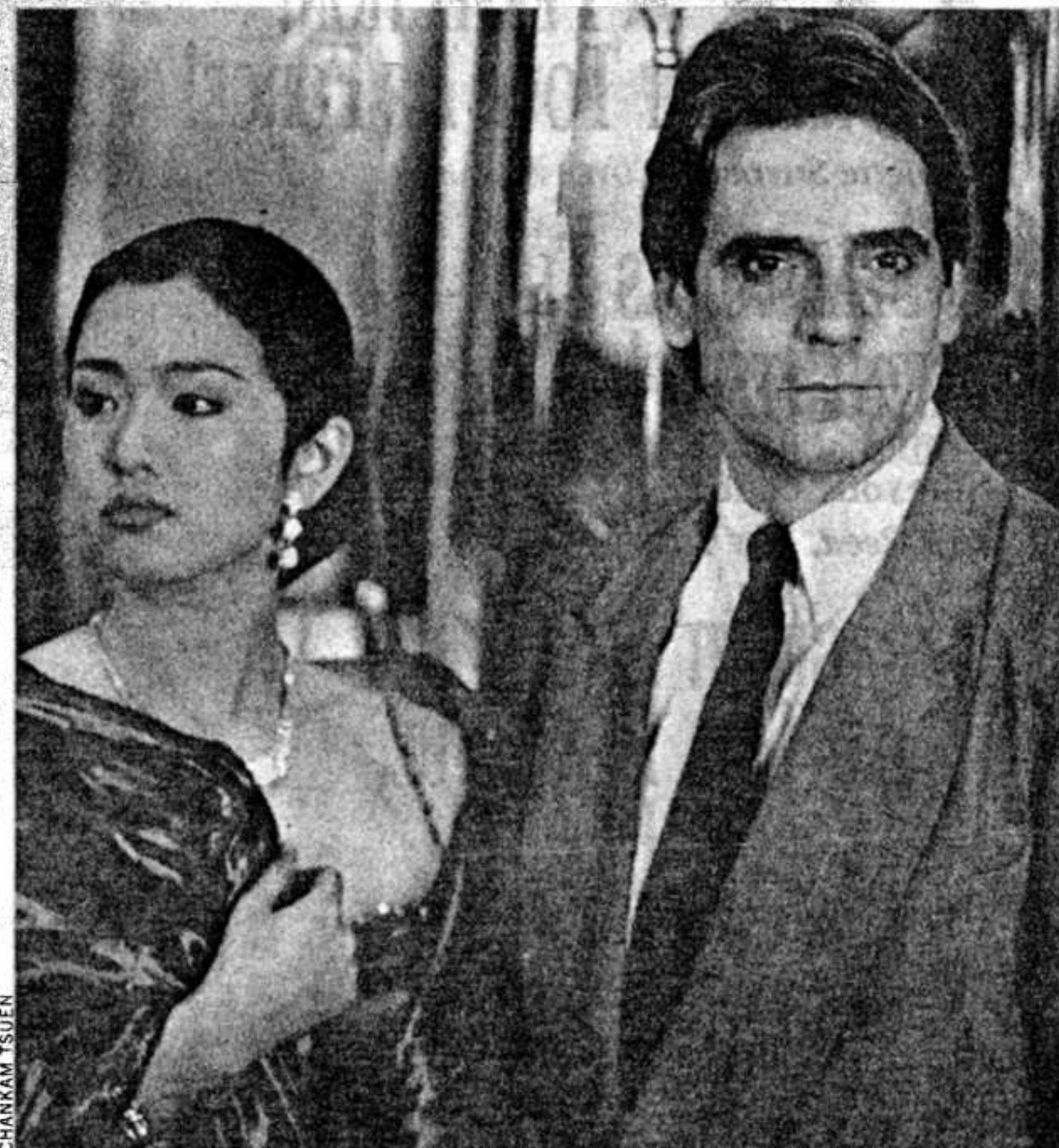
Grey Gardens
A film by Albert and David Maysles
At Film Forum
April 17 through 30

BY MICHAEL
ATKINSON

velous dissipation is so thick-necked a metaphor for the sorry State of Things I wondered why he just didn't wear a placard ("Honk If You Symbolize the Spiritual Death of Civilization").

At the same time, Wang and company are grandly nebulous about their fears and doubts, just as the title promises thematic intricacy the film never delivers. Likewise, the romance is discussed rather than manifested. While Gong and Cheung are merely iconic, Rubén Blades (as Irons's comic-relief photog pal) steals every scene he's in, and Irons, despite his metaphoric burden, is regally convincing, like a sick lion trying to find a corner of veldt to die in. Still, all the star power in the open market can't disguise the fact that *Chinese Box* is masterfully executed laziness, an Asian guided tour for the epochally depressed.

TALK ABOUT METAPHORS: the wacky Bouvier-Beale broads of the Maysles' semiclassic 1975 doc *Grey Gardens* represent an entire diseased faction of modern celebrity culture, as well as a sick sapling off the robust Kennedy tree that makes the case (as if it needed to



CHANKAM TSUEN

Boxed in: Hong Kong holdouts Gong Li and Jeremy Irons

be made again) for that dynasty being the great white metaphor for the American century.

Shut-in Yankee aristo-nuts living in opulent squalor on Long Island, elderly Big Edie and middle-aged lily Little Edie puff up for the Maysles' invasive camera like pet-store puppies, and every scene is a queasy stew of freak-

show voyeurism and freestanding inquiry into the principles of nonfiction film—is the filmmakers' unblinking exploitation of the Bouvier-Beale family a violation of objectivity? If it's not exploitative, why else are the Maysles there? *Grey Gardens* is a thicket of philosophical knots; arm up for the postscreening argument. **V**