

## Document Citation

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**AKRIET**

Village Voice

New York may lack palm trees and the Carleton terrace, but the city's continual film festival is as eclectic in its way as any. This weekend, for starters, the annual Asian American International Film Festival is giving two recent and worthy features—the Chinese *Regret for the Past* and the Indian *Akriet*—their local premieres at NYU's Schimmel Auditorium.

*Regret for the Past* (June 18) tells the tale of a progressive couple living in sin in the politically unstable Beijing of the early 1920s. Perhaps because it's taken from material by the great Chinese modernist Lu Xun (author of *The True Story of Ah Q*), theirs is a love story full of tragic ironies. Stirred by a performance of Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, the upper-class heroine breaks with her feudal family to move in with her intellectual boyfriend. After her relatives manage to get him fired from his job, and he's unable to earn a living from his writing, she grows increasingly depressed. He takes this for excessive dependency and, hoping to restore her initial "courage," suggests that they part. They do, she dies, and he's consumed with remorse.

Directed by veteran Shui Hua, who made a number of key films during the 1950s and early '60s before falling from favor during the Cultural Revolution, *Regret* carries the staccato zooms, marketplace set pieces, and continual use of the objective correlative that characterize current Chinese movies into an often heady mannerism. The film is evidently Shui's first in almost 20 years, and it's overstuffed with visual ideas—lyrical superimpositions, hand-held inserts, subjectively expanded dramatic scenes, nature montages that verge on the ideogrammatic. Despite the self-lacerating Dostoevskian quality of the hero's confessional voice-over, *Regret* is at once naively obvious and totally cryptic (with one of the most blatantly oblique seductions in movie history), a combination that's ultimately extremely engrossing. I've only seen a handful of post-1977 Chinese movies, but none of them approach the emotional complexity or stylistic conviction of *Regret for the Past*.

Screening on June 19, *Akriet (Misbegotten)* is the first feature directed by Bombay talkie star Amol Paleka and is typical of a new breed of Indian movies that intersperse "adult" subject matter and naturalistic performances with frequent playback song montages. The film draws on the same incident of ritual murder in rural Maharashtra—a state in west-central India whose largest city is Bombay—that inspired Ramdas Phutane's 1979 *Sarvasakshi* (shown last fall at the Museum of Modern Art). But whereas the Phutane film was an atmospheric metaphysical horror story,

6/22/82 "Ex-Laners Hits The Streets"

*Akriet* is more clinical and prosaic. Scripted by the prolific Vijay Tendulkar, a leading Marathi dramatist, the film is less a thriller than a meditation on sexual domination and social power—themes which have concerned Tendulkar in the past.

As the womanizing Mugutrao, a gangsterish village honcho whose mistress's all-consuming desire for a child leads her to dabble in occultism and human sacrifice, Paleka gives a performance of hulking authority. His ham-fisted technique is directorially less successful—like



China doll: the tragic heroine denounced in Shui's *Regret for the Past*

many Indian movies, *Akriet* feels 20 minutes too long—but once the plot gets untangled, it's a powerful, gripping film that resists overexploiting its lurid premise.