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Execution in Autumn

Hong Kong, 1971

Director: Li Hsing

Cert—(not yet issued). *dist*—Kai Fa (U.K.) *p.c*—Ta Chung Motion Picture Co. *exec. p*—Hu Cheng Ting. *p*—Chen Ju Lin. *assoc. p*—Tsai Tung-Hua. *p. manager*—Li Li. *asst. d*—Li Jung-Chih, Yang Chia-Yun. *sc*—Chang Yung-Hsiang. *ph*—Lai Cheng-Ying. *Scope. col*—Tokyo Genzo-sho. *lighting*—Li Ya-Tung. *ed*—Chen Hung-Min. *a.d*—Chou Chih-Liang. *set dec*—Chen Fu-Wen. *m*—Saito Ichiro. *cost*—Wang Wen-Wei, Shu Lan-Ying. *make-up*—Chia Lu-shih. *sd. rec*—Wang Jung-Fang, Chiang Sheng. *fight arranger*—Chen Hui-Lou. *l.p*—Ou Wei (*Pei Kang*), Tang Pao-Yun (*Lien Erh*), Ko Hsiang-Ting (*Prison Governor Lao Tou*), Fu Pi-Hui (*Nai Nai, Pei's Grandmother*), Wu Chia-Chi (*Studious Prisoner*), Chen Hui-Lou (*Thief*), Li Hsiang (*Chun Tao*), Tsui Fu-Sheng (*County Magistrate*), Han Su (*Pei Hsun*), Chou Shao-Ching (*Hsing Tsao*), Wang Yu (*2nd Lord*), Chen Chiu, Wang Fei and Min Min (*Prison Guards*), Wan Chieh and Wan Yun (*Official Deputies*), Lu Chih and Li Min-Lang (*Brave Men*), Yang Lieh and Wang Han-Chen (*Pei's Victims*), Hsiang Yang (*Neighbour*), Wu Yen (*Neighbour's Wife*), Chin Hui (*Boy*), Yao Hsiao-Chang (*Woman*). 8,910 ft. 99 mins. *Subtitles*.

Alternative Hong Kong (Chinese) title—Ch'iu Chueh

In Han Dynasty China, Emperor Hsiao Ho decrees that executions of criminals will take place only in the autumn, in harmony with the earth's natural cycle. The selfish, unruly Pei Kang, last surviving male in a noble family, is imprisoned just after the cycle of autumn executions has taken place; he has been sentenced to death for murdering the prostitute Chun Tao and her two 'cousins' after they had tried to force him to admit fathering her child. Pei's domineering grandmother, afraid that the Pei clan will die out, tries desperately to secure his release: she sends her relative Pei Hsun to the capital to exploit his connections in court, herself bribes a local official, and manages to arrange for an appeal hearing. But Pei shows no penitence at his appeal, and the judge confirms the sentence. Pei is returned to prison to await execution the following autumn. The bribed official suggests that the grandmother has one last recourse: if she can persuade a girl to marry Pei in prison, Pei will be able to sire an heir despite his impending death. The grandmother duly asks Lien Erh, a young ward of the family, to marry Pei, and eventually convinces prison governor Lao Tou to permit Lien Erh to visit her husband. But Pei shrinks from consigning Lien Erh to a life of widowhood, and sends her away. Unknown to Pei, his grandmother dies soon afterwards. Touched by Pei's considerateness, Lien Erh returns to the prison, and she and Pei consummate their marriage. Lien Erh becomes pregnant. As the months pass, Pei's character mellows. Lao Tou, moved by this turn of events, allows Lien Erh to spend more and more time in the prison; and when news of the date for Pei's execution arrives, he tries to allow the condemned man to escape. But Pei, who now accepts full responsibility for his crimes, insists on facing his punishment honourably. Hiding by the roadside, Lien Erh steals a last glimpse of him as he is led to his death.

Li Hsing's beginnings as a director were in the Taiwan film industry in the early Sixties; his first films were reportedly striking social realist dramas. More recently, he has become known (and

greatly respected and admired among Chinese audiences) for a series of romantic dramas, many of them based on novels by Chiung Yao, which are notable for both their meticulous *mise en scène* and their consistent assumption that personal relationships reflect broader social and political issues. *Execution in Autumn* lies somewhat outside the main line of this development, as does Li's contribution to the previous year's *Four Moods* (which also starred the late Ou Wei); these two films seem to represent a phase when Li's commitment to social criticism led him into an area near that of Mizoguchi's great period films. Like *Sansho Dayu*, *Execution in Autumn* is conceived with deceptive simplicity as a kind of humanist fable; both films are set in remote and generally barbaric periods of history, and both centre on the moral regeneration of the main character. But where Mizoguchi invariably opts for a half-detached, historicised perspective on his material, Li's conceptual framework is bolder, more traditional, and—in audience terms—more immediately felt. Using as his starting point the almost visionary piece of Han Dynasty legislation that confined state executions to their 'proper' season, he builds the natural world of the changing seasons into the very fabric of his film: in his control of colour and design, and in all his decisions about the staging and the 'incidental' details. Since the entire film appears to be studio-shot, this process is more a matter of suggestion and implication than of straightforward depiction. Far from amounting to a suite of banal equations between the characters' moods and the weather, the result is more akin to the tradition of Chinese lyric verse, in which the crucial ambiguities of Chinese syntax, tense and subject/object relationship are exploited to yield statements that are at once particular and general, precise and vague, humdrum and transcendental. For instance, when Li dissolves from a discreet but joyous image of Pei and Lien Erh in bed, about to consummate their marriage, to an image of a tree in bud, the juxtaposition yields at least three direct meanings: most obviously, it connotes the fruitfulness of the sexual union, but it also marks the decisive change in Pei's feelings (not just his touching acceptance of another's love, but also his reasoned acceptance of his fate in law), as well as denoting the simple passage of time, with its bleak corollary that Pei's death is drawing nearer. This kind of multi-layered effect operates throughout the film, broadened and strengthened by Li's various other syntactic and dramatic strategies. He makes frequent use of camera movement within confined spaces like the cells and the prison yard, thereby keeping the relationships between the characters unresolved and constantly discovering new visual emphases. He uses Resnais-like flashbacks to Pei's crimes during the appeal hearing, creating a complex interpenetration of past and present. He foregrounds a seemingly insignificant 'background' detail in a scene so that it resonates with the overt dramatic point of the scene (as when he cuts to the masked dancer at the inn where Pei's grandmother denounces her supposedly influential relative for his hypocrisy). And on a script level, he and his regular collaborator Chang Yung-Hsiang manage to assimilate a number of dramatic devices from traditional theatre without ever lapsing into glib schematisations: Pei's fellow prisoners in the cells, for example, are an inveterate thief and a quiet, bookish student (the latter serving time on behalf of his bankrupt father), and their contrasted conversations with Pei and squabbles with each other clearly in some sense relate to Pei's own ambivalent impulses. The point is, though, that such devices work through suggestion rather than assertion, in much the same way as the significations of the outside world. It is doubtless this combination of smooth surface with swirling undercurrents that makes *Execution in Autumn* so extraordinarily moving, especially in its closing scenes. Both Li and his excellent cast handle the more treacherous moments with an exemplary lack of sentimentality, but it is the film's carefully constructed ambience, its web of dreams, memories, possibilities and imaginings, that makes it so potent. Now that the film has made the transition from the Chinese club circuit to a broader audience in this country, it is to be hoped that Li Hsing's other work will follow in its wake. *Execution in Autumn* is certainly sufficiently remarkable in its own right to make such a move a real priority.

TONY RAYNS