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Venice Film Review: 'Red Amnesia'

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An award-worthy performance by stage vet Lu Zhong fuses together the incongruent elements of “Red Amnesia,” [Wang Xiaoshuai](#)'s involving if fragmented take on an older woman lost in the disorientation of China's breakneck changes and seeking expiation for an earlier act of self-preservation. Wang views “Amnesia” as the last of his Cultural Revolution trilogy, begun with “Shanghai Dreams” and “11 Flowers,” yet the film's first half is also related to “Chongqing Blues” in its expression of intergenerational disparity. Adding a mystery element contributes to the pic's fascination, and should entice buyers to try their luck on the international market.

Wang's usual subtle evocation of family dynamics is at its very best here in the way he reveals the relationships between recently widowed Deng Meijuan (Lu) and her offspring. Older son Jun (Feng Yuanzheng) could be a poster boy for China's economic miracle: He and wife Lu (Amanda Qin) live with their little boy in a modern, handsomely furnished apartment, drive a new VW, and have embraced busy international consumerist culture. Gay younger son Bing (Qin Hao) has a salon and a b.f. (Han Yibo); Mom knows about his sexuality but refuses to admit it, causing significant tension.

Used to playing certain roles — wife, mother, worker — Mrs. Deng is incapable of resetting her internal compass. Each day she enters her sons' homes to cook, or take charge of her grandson, much to her daughter-in-law's annoyance. She intrudes in Bing's life, scolding him for the way he lives (he's not the tidiest housekeeper); in turn, Bing retreats behind his cell phone, further pushing his mother out. After a lifetime of knowing her role, and adapting to quixotic changes imposed by the Communists, she's now disoriented on micro and macro levels, from Lu's lack of respect to Beijing's congested streets. Mrs. Deng herself isn't immune to these new family alignments: Her elderly mother is in a nursing home, and while she visits daily, the fact that she hasn't taken her into her own home is itself a significant shift in filial responsibility.

One day she starts receiving anonymous calls — the caller never speaks, yet the frequency of the calls increases. Jun thinks it could be an aggrieved business colleague of his, yet there's no way of identifying the number. Then one evening during a family dinner at Jun's, the bell rings, and when Lu sees who it is, she's greeted by a pile of trash at her doorstep.

By this point viewers know the perpetrator is a mysterious teen (Shi Liu) who has been tailing Mrs. Deng for days. The tattooed youth is also seen in unexplained standalone shots that, combined with images of ransacked apartments, add to the level of disturbance. Mrs. Deng's agitation grows, and with it return feelings of guilt, when she and her family were relocated to the mountainous southern province of Guizhou during the Cultural Revolution. When policies eased and it was possible for limited numbers of people to move away from the hardships of the factory, she stole the Beijing transfer spot allocated to the Zhao family, who were fated to remain in Guizhou.

In reality, Wang has crafted two movies. One is observational, reflecting on how rapid shifts in China's social fabric left an entire generation feeling unmoored. Those younger than Mrs. Deng, in her early 70s, embraced the model of Western consumerism, and the director fills his film with expertly observed details, from Lu's annoyance that her mother-in-law would take her grandson to the nursing home, to the way Bing tenderly removes an apron from around his b.f.'s waist. There aren't many medium-budgeted Chinese films with positive, nuanced gay characters, which is further reason to commend "Red Amnesia" in its depiction of contemporary Beijing life.

The other movie here is designed as a mystery (calling it a thriller is inaccurate), revealing the long-lasting damage caused by moral compromise. Wang is far too humane a director to lay blame, and Mrs. Deng's act of betrayal, committed to ensure a better future for her family, is one of those ethical choices few can condemn without being in a similar position. The film's implicit criticism lies not with Mrs. Deng but with the perpetrators of the Cultural Revolution, whose twisted mass experiment ended in so much death and long-lasting misery. The mystery elements with the boy are a handy device for drawing in an audience, yet their function takes a backseat to the deeper issues involved. Curiously, the Chinese title, translating as "The Intruder," chooses to emphasize this element.

Anchoring it all is Lu Zhong's fully realized performance. Bossy, lonely and haunted in multiple ways, her Mrs. Deng is also used to sacrificial altruism, and seeing how her children's lives need not include her is both perplexing and hurtful. Sitting in on a chorus practicing Communist songs offers her a whiff of nostalgia, yet

calling them comforting would be too simplistic. Lu is onscreen in practically every shot, movingly capturing this confused woman whose understanding of how love is expressed can't adjust to the new dynamics.

Wu Di's lensing reflects the film's different tenors, using shaky handheld visuals at moments of conflict, like dinner at Jun's house or in Beijing's chaotic streets; at other times, there's an almost elegiac feel to the elegant camerawork. Lou Pan's production design deserves mentioning, capturing Mrs. Deng's old-fashioned, harshly lit apartment and contrasting it with those of her children and neighbors, symbols of their comfortable position in the global bourgeoisie.

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CINEVUE

Venice 2014: 'Red Amnesia' review

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In a Venice that has been bizarrely bereft of strong female performances and roles - Bechdel tests at the ready - Xiaoshuai Wang's *Red Amnesia* (2014) comes as something of a latter-stage relief. Veteran Chinese theatre actress Lü Zhong catches the eye as Deng, an elderly woman recently bereaved. The newly-made widow keeps busy, picking her grandchild up from school and benignly if a bit bossily interfering in the lives of her two grown sons. She cooks meatballs for gay son Bing (Qin Hao), an act spiked with obvious maternal disapproval, and visits Jun (Feng Yuanzheng) who is a family man but whose daughter-in-law (Amanda Qin) is easily irritated by Deng's passive aggressive meddling.



Deng also takes it upon herself to look after her own ancient mother who is in a care home and at home talks to her dead husband who sits in his usual place as a kind of benign ghost. However, other less friendly phantoms lurk around her. The phone rings and when she picks up no one is there. A stone is thrown through her window and although the police are called and her sons suspect a local debt collector, no one seems to know what to do next. Throughout the slow progression of the opening the film's tone slips between a gentle observational humour of familial roles and the sense of impending threat. When a young boy (Shi Liu) arrives on the scene, Deng is unsure as to whether what she's experiencing is a supernatural event, a hallucination or something potentially life-threatening.

In using this initial mystery of unknown forces, Xiaoshuai's *Red Amnesia* shares many similarities with Michael Haneke's *Hidden* (2005) and he is exploring a similarly political act of wilful forgetting and guilt. Whereas Haneke's concern was Algeria, Xiaoshuai's is the Cultural Revolution and the survivors and perpetrators who remained. The slow revelation of a partly hidden, partly suppressed past makes of Deng's story something much

larger and the director broadens his vision, moving Deng out of Beijing and back to the countryside and location of her former exile. While in Beijing an endless queue forms to apply for one free apartment, the factory region of Guizhou deep in the countryside is apparently abandoned, full of crumbling red brick ruins and occasional residents effectively left behind.

The slow unwinding of the tale reveals Deng to be a much more complicated character than was first apparent and that even her sons suspected. Indeed, *Red Amnesia's* first half is about generational neglect, the rendering obsolete of those who no longer have a place and their vulnerable position in the city. This at first seems unjust as she has done so much for her family, made hard choices. However, in her commitment to her sons, there has also been a callous selfishness, which has caused untold damage and suffering. *Red Amnesia* is a brave and necessary film, probing painful memories and stirring into life forgotten guilt and enmity. Although there is the odd moment which slips into melodrama, the drama is sustained by a pitch perfect and award worthy performance by Lü.

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