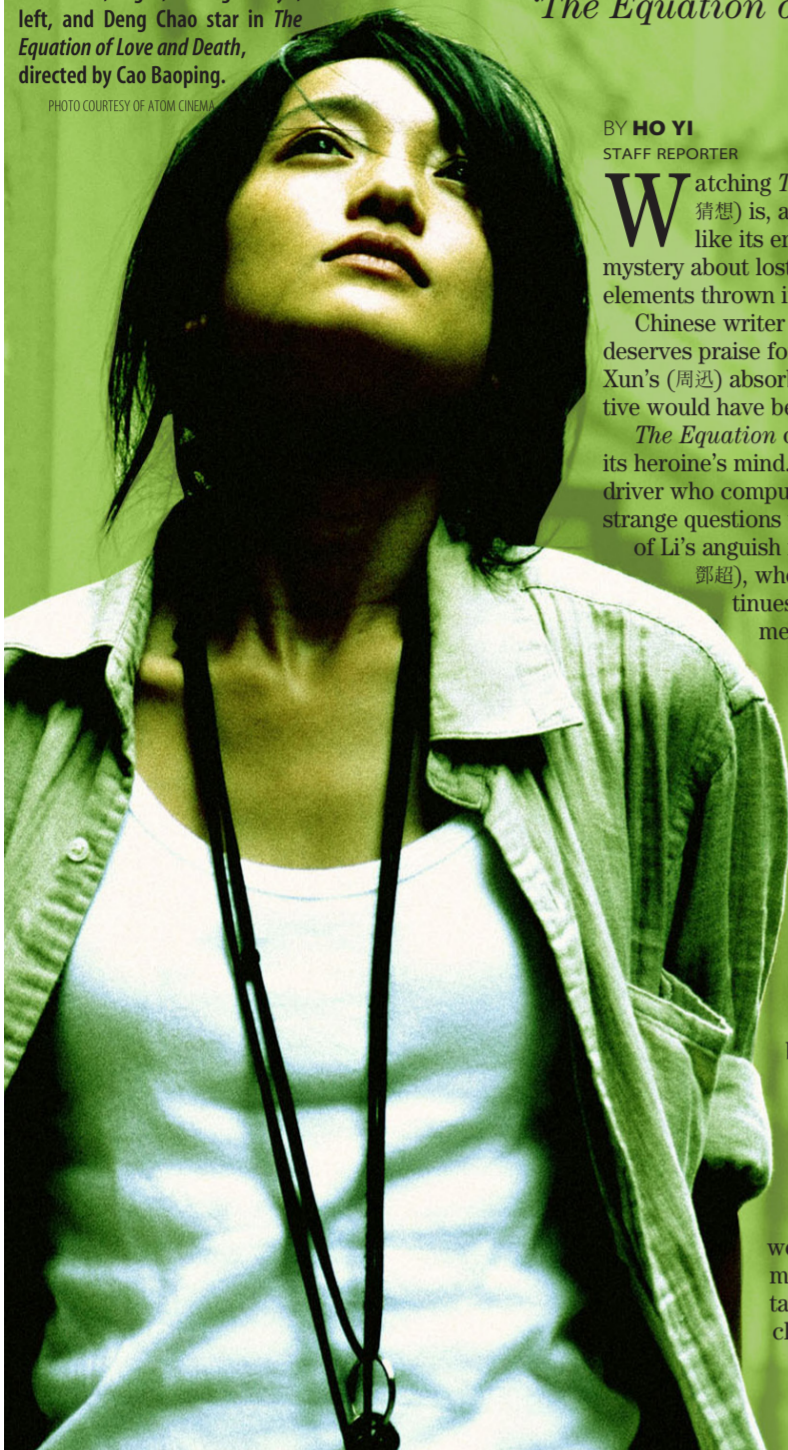


Love lost in Kunming

Zhou Xun, right, Zhang Hanyu, left, and Deng Chao star in *The Equation of Love and Death*, directed by Cao Baoping.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ATOM CINEMA



'The Equation of Love and Death' shows why Zhou Xun is one of the best actors working in China today

BY HO YI
STAFF REPORTER

Watching *The Equation of Love and Death* (李米的猜想) is, at times, unexpectedly enthralling. Much like its enigmatic characters, the film is a restless mystery about lost love and obsession, with shady criminal elements thrown in.

Chinese writer and director Cao Baoping (曹保平) deserves praise for his original style, but without Zhou Xun's (周迅) absorbing performance, the film's lack of narrative would have been disappointing.

The Equation opens by examining the restless state of its heroine's mind. Li Mi (Zhou Xun) is a chain-smoking taxi driver who compulsively counts out numbers and poses strange questions to her bewildered passengers. The source of Li's anguish is her boyfriend, Fang Wen (Deng Chao, 邓超), who disappeared four years ago but continues to send her letters that she religiously memorizes and guards ferociously.

On a typical hazy day in Kunming, Li parrots her usual quandaries to two rural hick-type passengers played by Wang Yanhui (王砚辉) and Wang Baoqiang (王宝强).

When she nips off to get change, the pair steal her cherished album of Fang's photos and off they go to meet a contact on a bridge. However, they reach their destination only to find someone else there, a poetry-gushing man who as they approach falls to his death.

The man lands on a car being driven by Ma Bing (also Deng) and his female companion Feifei (Wang Ning, 王宁). When Ma gets out to check the man, he sees an album drop from the bridge above, which is filled with pictures of himself.

From that point on, Li is thrown into a web of coincidence and intrigue involving mistaken and changed identity, hostage-taking and drug-trafficking that bring her closer and closer to the love of her life.

The film's melancholic palette of blue-green hues sets the tone as the bustling city of Kunming feels as if it's all traffic,

highways and cars full of faceless riders and isolated drivers.

Director Cao does an effective job of sustaining an air of mystery while revealing a chain of events that gradually pieces the puzzle together. Audiences must stay alert while following the characters, who lurch from one mess to another.

Dramatic momentum is maintained throughout the 96-minute-long film. However, the coincidences, and unexpected turns and twists that move the plot forward may strike some as a bit too contrived, which obscures the narrative thread.

On the other hand, what matters most may not be the plot, but the emotions, heightened tension and motivations that make each character three-dimensional. There is Fang Wen, a poor urban youth who breaks the law to survive. The role, played by young actor Wang Baoqiang, represents the heart of rural China where farmers can no longer make a living off the land and are forced to work in the underbellies of the country's cities.

However, it is Zhou who carries the movie from beginning to end. As the foul-mouthed, lovelorn cabby, she admirably runs the emotional gamut from frantic and frightened to desperate and heartbroken. Though showy acting is sometimes demanded by the script, the actress never loses her poise and delivers a virtuoso performance that cements her reputation as one of the best actresses working in China today.

Film Notes

THE EQUATION OF LOVE AND DEATH (李米的猜想)

DIRECTED BY: CAO BAOPING (曹保平)

STARRING: ZHOU XUN (周迅) AS LI MI, DENG CHAO (邓超) AS FANG WEN AND MA BING, ZHANG HANYU (张涵予) AS YE QINGCHENG, WANG BAOQIANG (王宝强) AS QIU SHUITIAN

LANGUAGE: IN MANDARIN WITH ENGLISH AND CHINESE SUBTITLES

RUNNING TIME: 98 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

The captain and the kids



Nadim Sawalha stars in *Captain Abu Raed*, directed by Amin Matalqa.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ZEUS FILM

Film Notes

CAPTAIN ABU RAED

DIRECTED BY: AMIN MATALQA

STARRING: NADIM SAWALHA (ABU RAED), RANA SULTAN (NOUR), HUSSEIN AL-SOUS (MURAD), GHANDI SABER (ABU MURAD), NADIM MUSHAWAR (SAMEH)

RUNNING TIME: 102 MINUTES

LANGUAGE: IN ARABIC WITH CHINESE SUBTITLES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

For a small movie from Jordan, *Captain Abu Raed* is a remarkably accomplished achievement that bears comparison with the recently released Clint Eastwood film *Gran Torino*. There are some remarkable similarities in the story, and though the acting and production are not of such a uniformly high standard, there is much to recommend it. The fact that it does not rely on the manipulation of a celebrity image is one point that is very much in its favor.

The Captain Abu Raed of the title is in fact an airport janitor. He is not a captain, but an intellectual who, by one of the many misfortunes that have plagued the Middle East, has lost everything, and despite his fluency in European languages, and possibly other intellectual accomplishments, is now content to clean the floors of Jordan's international airport.

One day he finds a pilot's cap discarded in a trashcan. Wearing it on his way home, he is mistaken for a pilot by the kids of his impoverished neighborhood, and

soon gets inveigled, against his better judgment, to play the role of a globe-trotting pilot, telling the kids fanciful tales of countries he has never visited.

And so begins his relationship with Sameh and Murad. Sameh reveres Abu Raed, while Murad wants to show the other kids that Abu Raed is an idol with feet of clay. In the end, Abu Raed saves one, but cannot but abandon the other to the fate that awaits all the kids who's lives are defined by poverty. While the acting spills over into the overwrought dramatic devices of soap opera toward the end, the characters have by this time generated such a degree of sympathy that it is all too easy to ignore the overacting and simply go with the flow.

Nadim Sawalha, a British-based actor who has played Middle Eastern types in everything from *The Sweeney* to *Syriana*, holds everything together with a splendidly natural performance, creating a splendid rapport with the cast of street kids in which his own insecurities, as an old man, play off wonderfully against the youthful aggression of

characters like Murad. Abu Raed, unlike Eastwood's character in *Gran Torino*, doesn't have a shotgun to back him up, nor the mythology of *Dirty Harry*.

Rana Sultan provides a sexy contrast to the dumpy Sawalha, as a real airline pilot for Air Jordan. She notices Abu Raed as he helps out a French tourist and they become friends, sheltered by their discrepancy in age and social status. Sultan, who is a well-known television personality in the Middle East, seems comfortable in the film medium, and manages to be glamorous without trying to steal the show, which rightfully belong to the child actors Nadim Mushahwar (Sameh) and Hussein Al-Sous (Murad).

Captain Abu Raed indicates that director Amin Matalqa, a Jordanian-born American, is someone to watch. He seems comfortable working within his Jordanian heritage, avoiding the exoticism and caricature of his characters. One of the highlights of the film is a glimpse of daily life in Amman that manages to eschew touristic clichés. That in itself is no mean achievement.

OTHER RELEASES

► COMPILED BY MARTIN WILLIAMS

The Ghosts of Girlfriends Past

Matthew McConaughey is putting together a lengthy portfolio of pretty but off-putting romantic roles, and this film is at the top of the list. He plays a photographer and professional cad who goes through women like fast food, but this being an American comedic take on Dickens, moral accountability lies in wait — after the audience has got off on a heap of crudity and sexism — in the shape of his once randy but now cautionary uncle (Michael Douglas) and his very first conquest (Emma Stone), both back from the dead. Can these spoiler-specters steer marauding Matthew toward marital bliss with sweetie-pie Jennifer Garner? Who gives a crap?



You Will Be Mine

No less dysfunctional, but more intense, is the main relationship in this lustful psychodrama from France. A university student and musician discovers that her roommate wants more from her than rent and good conversation and that getting sexually involved with her isn't such a good idea. The French title of this classical music-garnished obsession romp is *Je te mangerai*, but the delicate Chinese title translates as "You are my lesbian," which gets more confusing the more you think about it.



The Shonen Merikensack

The title of this Japanese comedy refers to a punk rock band that is brought back from the dead — figuratively, that is (this isn't Dickens). The three-decade-old outfit comes together after the discovery of a music video by a would-be go-getter in the music industry, but the aging band members are worse for wear after all that time in the real world. Big laughs abound.



Neknade

The problem with cute animal movies is that in the real world they fuel demand for pets among smitten youngsters — only for a good proportion of the poor creatures to be abandoned by callous parents when they're not cute anymore. In this Japanese film, however, the protagonist is a crusty, aging middle manager who does the opposite: He takes in a stray kitten, and his life — a mixture of ruthlessness and suppressed emotion — is turned upside down. The Chinese title misleadingly tags this fictional yarn as a sequel to *A Tale of Mari and Three Puppies*, which was based on a true story.



Home

This environmental documentary offers two firsts: It's the first film to secure advertising on Taiwanese garbage trucks, and the first film to feature narration by Taipei Mayor Hau Lung-bin (郝龍斌), presumably riding on his CV as former head of the Environmental Protection Administration). Neither curio is likely to make this offspring of *Powaqqatsi* and *An Inconvenient Truth* a blockbuster in a busy line-up of new releases this week, but co-producer Luc Besson might find solace in an emerging environmental awareness in the Taiwanese market, especially on Earth Day. The overbearing narration in the English version is by Glenn Close.



The Qinghai-Tibet Line (青藏線)

If you loved *Trail of the Panda* and are blind to politics, this Chinese melodrama about the epic construction of the railway to Tibet may entertain with lots of trains, pretty scenery and dramatic chutzpah. For others, it may be a sickening mask for state oppression and domination of minorities in a propaganda format not seen much anymore. According to the China Tibet Information Center, "It is among the 50 films to be shown in theaters [in China] during September 15 to October 31 [in 2007] as recommended by the State Administration of Radio, Film and TV, the country's top regulator of the industry." The icing on the cake? It's being released here on a key anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre.



Who's the man with the master plan?

Tibet's spiritual leader runs circles around 40 leading intellectuals in *'Dalai Lama Renaissance'*

BY IAN BARTHOLOMEW
STAFF REPORTER

Dalai Lama Renaissance could very easily be one of these depressingly worthy films in which the great and the good expatiate on their grand ideas about what's wrong with the world. That's how it seems to start out, then almost magically, it turns into something rather different.

Harrison Ford's solemn introduction about "40 of the world's most innovative thinkers meeting with the Dalai Lama to solve many of the world's problems" had me checking the location of the emergency exits. Harrison Ford is not a natural narrator, and his introduction to the film in solemn, earnest tones is off-putting. He seems to be announcing: "This is a serious film."

Get beyond this, and beyond some of the rather sententious statements of the "innovative thinkers" as they gather at Dharamsala, and the film rapidly grabs hold of you. It does so by not being about the world's problems at all, but about individuals and about the many illusions they have about themselves and about each other.

The people who have been invited are mostly highly articulate and often very thoughtful, many of them holding positions at the top of their various professions, albeit mostly with New Age leanings. They include people like Fred Alan Wolf, a theoretical physicist; Vicki Robin, co-author of *Your Money or Your Life*; Harry Morgan Moses, a motivational corporate trainer; and Thomas

Forsthoefel, an associate professor of religious studies. They are all in Dharamsala to interact, to find ways to share their insights and develop a plan to save the world. At least that is what they think.

The personality of the Dalai Lama is a constant presence in the film, though he leaves the intellectuals to do most of the talking. Insisting that he is nothing but a "simple monk," he manages to bring them down to earth with a thump whenever their ideas fly off into the stratosphere. There is plenty of humor, all the more revealing for its being unintentional on the part of the conference participants. As some of them recognize, for all their intellectual attainments, they are egotistical and self-absorbed



The Dalai Lama stars in *Dalai Lama Renaissance*, directed by Khashyar Darvich.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SKY DIGI ENTERTAINMENT

people who want to lead, who want to be the ones who put forward the plan.

The earnestness of this New Age conference is the source of plentiful humor, and director Khashyar Darvich is not inclined to be over-deferential. Arguments

erupt over who gets to talk and when. The problems Fred Wolf and fellow theoretical physicist Amit Goswami have in setting up terms for a discussion (they never succeed) is top-notch comedy, and when the Dalai Lama puts the kibosh on various political

Film Notes

DALAI LAMA RENAISSANCE

DIRECTED BY: KHASHYAR DARVICH

NARRATED BY: HARRISON FORD AND FEATURING THE DALAI LAMA AND "40 OF THE WORLD'S MOST INNOVATIVE THINKERS"

RUNNING TIME: 81 MINUTES

TAIWAN RELEASE: TODAY

and economic means of solving the "Tibet problem," he leaves his proactive do-gooder congregation momentarily flummoxed.

Rather than solving the world's problems, these leading intellectuals find themselves embarked on a journey of self-dis-

covery, the Dalai Lama a jesting pilot at the helm. In relation to the Tibet issue, the Dalai Lama's attitude forces a number of them to realize that they need to resolve their own personal Tibets before they can sally forth in aid of the Dalai Lama's. In a sense, they are very nicely told where they get off, and with the blessing of the Dalai Lama, they should go home and think about things more clearly.

Many people who view this film will share many of the assumption of the predominantly Western conference participants. To solve a problem, you form a plan and then you implement it. The Dalai Lama suggests that nothing is that simple. It is amusing to see the group of high-powered thinkers put in their place, but the lessons of *Dalai Lama Renaissance* apply just as much to the audience watching this insightful documentary.