

ELECTRIC SHADOWS

A Film by Xiao Jiang

95 Minutes, Color, 2004
35mm, 1:1.85, Dolby SR
In Mandarin w/English Subtitles



FIRST RUN FEATURES

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Short Synopsis:

From one of China's newest voices in cinema and new wave of young female directors comes this charming and heartwarming tale of a small town cinema and the lifelong influence it had on a young boy and young girl who grew up with the big screen in that small town...and years later meet by chance under unusual circumstances in Beijing.

Long Synopsis:

Beijing, present. Mao Dabing ('Great Soldier' Mao) has a job delivering bottled water but lives for his nights at the movies. One sunny evening after work he's racing to the movie theatre on his bike when he crashes into a pile of bricks in an alleyway. As he's picking himself up, a young woman who saw the incident picks up a brick and hits him on the head... He awakens in the hospital with his head bandaged. The police tell him that he's lost his job, and that his ex-boss expects him to pay for the wrecked bicycle. By chance he sees the young woman who hit him and angrily remonstrates with her. But she seems not to hear him, and hands him her apartment keys and a note asking him to feed her fish. Dabing is amazed to discover that the woman's room is a virtual shrine to the movies, crammed with posters, stills and memorabilia. Amongst it he finds a diary, and begins reading.

Ningxia, c. 1971. Jiang Xuehua is an attractive young woman who has dreams of performing on the stage. She loves the movies and particularly reveres the pre-war chanteuse Zhou Xuan. She has a job broadcasting public service announcements and news over the civic public address system and joins a local cultural troupe to pursue her ambition to act. Then she finds herself pregnant.

When her lover abandons her, Xuehua considers going away to have her child in secret and then give it up for adoption. She also considers suicide. On what she intends to be the last night of her life, she goes to see a rare foreign film playing at the town's open-air theatre -- and goes into labour during the show, helped by Pan Daren, the projectionist. Her child is a daughter, named Ling Ling -- the author of the diary in which this story is recorded. Xuehua is criticised in 'struggle sessions' for refusing to name the father of her child, and she loses her job. But after Chairman Mao's death and the fall of the 'Gang of Four', life quickly returns to normal and both mother and daughter are accepted in the community. Ling Ling inherits her mother's love for the movies, and the two are frequent visitors to Uncle Pan's open-air theatre, the Big Movie World.

The bane of Ling Ling's life is her new classmate Xiaobing ('Little Soldier'), a troublesome boy newly transferred from another school and in need of remedial teaching. After several misadventures, though, the two become firm friends. Xiaobing even stays in Xuehua's home for a few nights after running away from his abusive father. But then Xiaobing is sent away to live with his grandfather in distant Anhui. His parting gift to Ling Ling is his pair of 'magic' binoculars, through which -- he says -- he can see imaginary movies. Ling Ling is horrified when her mother suddenly marries Uncle Pan, and even more horrified when they have a baby a year later -- a son named Bing Bing. The doting parents spoil their new son, and Ling Ling grows more and more jealous and resentful. When both kids are offered places in the Youth Training School for budding performers, and Uncle Pan and Xuehua can afford to pay the fees for only one of them, it's Bing Bing they choose. The rise of television pushes the movies into decline, and the Big Movie World faces closure. On the evening of its final show, Xuehua tells Ling Ling to stay home to study and locks her in when she protests. But Bing Bing sneaks home with the keys to let her out. They climb to the top of a water tower to watch the show, but Bing Bing falls to his death in an accident. Uncle Pan furiously hits Ling Ling on the head, causing permanent damage to her hearing...

Beijing, present. Ling Ling's diary leaves Mao Dabing stunned. He *is* the former Xiaobing, and Ling Ling is the girl he befriended during his childhood year in Ningxia. The police tell him that Ling Ling is now in psychiatric care, and reveal why she struck him in the alley: his collision with the pile of bricks crushed and killed her pet dog. On the balcony outside Ling Ling's room, Mao Dabing finds the binoculars he gave her, permanently trained on a house in the alleys nearby. And through the binoculars he sees two very familiar faces...

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About the Director:

XIAO JIANG was born in northern China in 1972, a few years after the most chaotic period of the Cultural Revolution. She performed in student dramas at university and then went on to join the Directing Class at the Beijing Film Academy. She graduated in 1995 and began working for television, making programs for China Central TV, Beijing TV and Phoenix TV. She went on to write and direct three TV films before joining China Film Group as a screenwriter. *ELECTRIC SHADOWS* is her debut feature as writer and director

“A lovely, elegant paean to the joy and liberty that films offer... *ELECTRIC SHADOWS* is sweet and accomplished and Xiao Jiang is a terrific new find.” - *The Hollywood Reporter*

“Xiao Jiang shows she has the makings of a quality mainstream filmmaker.” -*Variety*

"Supremely entertaining debut feature by woman director Xiao Jiang...a highly emotive love-letter to five decades of Chinese movies. It is a Chinese Cinema Paradiso."
-*Vancouver International Film Festival*

~ Festivals ~

Toronto, Vancouver Anniversary Gala Presentation, Pusan, Capetown, Rotterdam,
Bangkok, Palm Springs, Birds Eye View London

~ Awards ~

Jury Award Marakesh

(the jury was presided over by British director Alan Parker and included Rosanna Arquette, Guillaume Canet and Chantal Akerman)

Lotus Premiere Award at 7th Deauville Asian Film Festival

(This award was voted by the audience among the films in competition)

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CREDITS & CAST

Production Company *Beijing Dadi Century Limited*

Production Team

Executive Producer *John SHAM*

Director *Xiao Jiang*

Production Executives *HUANG Jianxin, Derek YEE Tung Sing*

Cinematographers *YANG Lun, CHEN Hong*

Art Director *FU Delin*

Music *ZHAO Lin*

Cast

JIANG Xuehua, Ling Ling's mother

MAO Dabing ('Great Soldier' Mao)

PAN Daren, Ling Ling's stepfather

Ling Ling as a small girl

Ling Ling as a teenager

Ling Ling as young woman

Mao Xiaobing ('Little Soldier' Mao)

Bing Bing

Xiaobing's Father

Policewoman

Doctor *NIU*

Middle-aged Woman

Teacher

JIANG Yihong

XIA Yu

LI Haibin

GUAN Xiaotong

ZHANG Yijing

QI Zhongyang

WANG Zhengjia

ZHANG Haoqi

XIA Yuqing

JIANG Shan

Zhenhua

LIU yang

ZHAO Jinbao

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Electric Shadows is the literal translation of *Dianying*, the Chinese word for 'cinema'. It's a fitting title, because Xiao Jiang's story is about characters who love movies -- whose lives have been shaped and guided by the movies they love. Four Chinese films in particular -- each from a different decade -- play a significant part in the lives of Ling-Ling, her mother and MAO Dabing:

- ***Street Angel*** (Malu Tianshi) One of the best-loved classics from the pre-war film industry in Shanghai, this was written and directed by YUAN Muzhi in 1937. It was released just before Shanghai fell to the Japanese and remains in distribution even today, although (like all vintage Chinese movies) it was banned during the Cultural Revolution period. It gave the singer ZHOU Xuan her most iconic role as a poor teahouse singer who risks being forced into prostitution.
- ***Railway Guerrillas*** (Tiedao Youjidui) Adapted from a popular novel, this adventure movie about the anti-Japanese resistance was directed by ZHAO Ming for Shanghai Film Studio in 1956. Its non-stop action scenes, many set on fast-moving trains, made it a favourite film with children.
- ***Shining Red Star*** (Shanshan de Hongxing) Co-directed by LI Jun and LI Ang for the army's August First Film Studio in 1974, this tale of a boy hero in the anti-Japanese war was typical of Maoist propaganda films during the Cultural Revolution period. Its young protagonist PAN Dongzi ('Winter Boy') was intended as a role-model for kids -- and many kids in the audience revered him as such.
- ***The Back Alley*** (Xiao Jie) Daringly experimental for its day, this romantic melodrama with three alternative endings was made for Shanghai Film Studio by director YANG Yanjin in 1981. It was popular less for its modernist storytelling than for its complete break with the tradition of Maoist propaganda. In *Electric Shadows*, it's the last film screened at the open-air cinema. Several other movies and plays crop up in the film. They include another film about a boy hero of the anti-Japanese resistance, *Little Soldier Zhang Ga* (Xiao Bing Zhang Ga, 1963), and two of Madame Mao's "model revolutionary works", *The Red Lantern* (Hongdeng Ji, filmed in 1970) and *Red Detachment of Women* (Hongse Niangzijun, filmed in its dance-drama version in 1971). The Albanian film whose heroine inspires Ling Ling's mother is *Victory over Death*; during the Cultural Revolution period, when most Chinese and foreign films were banned, the only non-Chinese films screened were those from 'friendly' foreign countries -- such as Albania.

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DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I was born in 1972, the same year as the character Ling Ling in *Electric Shadows*. Her story is not my story, but I do have fond memories from my childhood of open-air movie shows. I grew up at a time when both material and spiritual things were severely lacking in China. It was a time before television and the Internet; we didn't even have telephones. And yet I think back on it as a happy time, largely because we went to the open-air movie shows so often. The range of films on offer was very narrow; they were mostly local political and 'revolutionary' films. But a passion for films was planted in my mind. I never dreamed that I'd become a film director one day.

I was a stalwart member of the Drama Club in college. I once performed a 50-minute one woman play; I was a bed-ridden woman who was afraid of being killed and I had to hold the stage alone, with no action and no supporting cast. The fact that it went well encouraged me to consider a career in the creative arts. Some years later I heard about the Beijing Film Academy, and applied for the post-graduate degree course in film directing.

The Academy's entrance exam was not easy. There were only three places on offer, and many applicants. I didn't study intensively to prepare for the exam; instead I spent my time helping students with their graduation projects, which gave me a lot of valuable practical experience. But I still didn't know much about filmmaking when I took the exam. Fortunately I think the examiners were looking for people with potential rather than people with extensive knowledge. I never said, "I don't know" in the exam, but tried to make connections with other, related issues to get my points across.

I was very full of myself when I entered the Academy, but my feelings had gone through a U-turn by the time I graduated: I felt I knew nothing about film-making and had acquired only very limited knowledge and experience during my years of study. At that time, the Academy courses were very much focused on 'Master' directors; both the faculty and the students loved European films more than anything. The heavier the film, the more they liked it. I distanced myself from this fashion. I didn't watch too many of the 'masterpieces' because I found them too boring. I was told that my life would benefit from exposure to them, but I gave up the struggle to force myself to watch them before long. When anyone asked me if I'd seen this or that 'masterpiece', I'd try to evade the issue. If people had known the truth, they'd probably have questioned whether I was really an Academy graduate or not.

But I was lucky in one way. My tutor, Professor Jiang Shixiong, taught me that the way to make a good film was to keep the Chinese audience in mind -- not simply follow my own tastes and interests. My time in the Academy left me unenthusiastic about overly commercial movies, but I do believe that the quality of a film is closely related to whether or not it reaches an audience. The conclusion I've come to is that I should concentrate on solid drama with individualised characters, while recognising the commercial realities of the market.

In April 2000 I attended a conference on the future of China's film industry, where I was excited to meet many of the directors whose films had meant so much to me in my childhood. I saw their deep anxiety over the future prospects for Chinese cinema, and had a sudden urge to make a film that I could dedicate to them. I wanted them to know that their work had enriched a small girl's heart, and I wanted to take them back to the 'golden age' of Chinese movies.

Beijing Dadi Century Limited and director Huang Jianxin gave me fantastic support in the making of *Electric Shadows*. I couldn't have made my debut feature without them. My film looks back to the time when all of China was crazy about movies. And I'm happy with the way it turned out. 2005 happens to mark the centenary of Chinese filmmaking. I consider *Electric Shadows* to be my gift to the Chinese film industry.

Xiao Jiang (2004)

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CAST

XIA YU made his screen debut in JIANG Wen's film *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), and won Best Actor prizes for his role at one Venice Film Festival, Singapore Film Festival and the Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan. He has since been seen in such films as Ann HU's *Shadow Magic* (1998), YU Zhong's *Roots and Branches* (2001), LU Xuechang's *Cala, My Dog* (2003) and XU Geng's *The Law of Romance* (2003), for which he won Best Actor award at the Golden Rooster Awards in China.

JIANG YIHONG graduated from the Acting Course at Beijing Film Academy and made her big-screen debut in the film *Wild Rose* in 1995. She has since starred in JIANG Wen's *Devils on the Doorstep* (1999) and FENG Xiaogang's *Leaving Me, Loving You* (2003). She has also been seen in many TV films and series.

CINEMATOGRAPHER YANG LUN previous credits include *Red Firecracker, Green Firecracker* (1993) and *Sun Valley* (1995), both directed by HE Ping, *Going to School with Dad on My Back* (1998) and Huang Jianxin's *Who Cares?* (2001).

ART DIRECTOR FU DELIN previous credits include Mabel CHEUNG's *The Soong Sisters* (1997), YU Zhong's *Roots and Branches* (2001) and Peter PAU's *The Touch* (2002).

DIRECTOR XIAO JIANG was born in northern China in 1972. On graduating with an MA degree in Film Directing from Beijing Film Academy, she joined the China Film Group as a director, and scripted the film *Wang Shouxian's Summer* for the company. She went on to direct four films for television (also scripting three of them) and has also directed programmes for Phoenix TV, China Central TV and Beijing TV. *Electric Shadows* is her first theatrical feature.

PRODUCTION EXECUTIVES

HUANG JIANXIN was born in Xi'an in 1954. After graduating, he served in the army and then worked as a still photographer before becoming an editor in the Script Department at Xi'an Film Studio, then under its legendary head Wu Tianming. After standing in for a sick continuity person one day, he found himself drawn irresistibly to filmmaking. In 1984, he took a one-year course at Beijing Film Academy. Back in Xi'an, he directed his controversial debut feature the following year. He spent the year of 1989 in Australia as an exchange scholar, but has otherwise been a prolific director and, latterly, producer in China. He is particularly known for his satirical accounts of Chinese bureaucracy.

DEREK YEE was born in Hong Kong into a family of actors (both of his elder brothers are movie stars), and so it was almost inevitable that he would join the film industry himself. He signed with Shaw Brothers as an actor, and starred in more than 40 movies over a nine-year period. When Shaw Brothers ceased regular production in the mid-1980s, he set himself up in business as an independent filmmaker, and directed his first feature in 1986. Since then he has been an active and prolific director, screenwriter and producer, and has won numerous awards for his work in Hong Kong, Taiwan and China. His seven films as producer include Ann Hui's *July Rhapsody* and Lo Chi-Leung's *Inner Senses* -- the last film to star the late Leslie Cheung.