

SHI ZI JIE TOU (CROSSROADS) China, 1937 Director: Shen Xiling
black-and-white 103 minutes Star Production Company
Rating: 12 of a possible 20 points *** of a possible *****
Key: *indicates outstanding performance or achievement

POINTS

- 1 DIRECTION: Shen Xiling
- 0 EDITING
- 2 CINEMATOGRAPHY: Yuru Wang*
- 1 STORY / SCREENPLAY: Shen Xiling
- 1 MUSIC (NON-ORIGINAL): mostly appropriated classical excerpts
- 2 ART DIRECTION
- 1 SOUND
- 1 LIGHTING
- 2 CREATIVITY

PRINCIPAL CAST: Zhao Dan (Zhao, an aspiring writer), Ban Lu (Tang, an aspiring artist), Bai Yang (Yang, Zhao's neighbor), Meng Sha (Liu, the eldest of the four male friends), Ming Yi (Xu, most pessimistic of the four males), Yin Ying (Yang's sister)

SHI ZI JIE TOU (CROSSROADS) shares a digital video disk with TIANMING (DAYBREAK), both films being part of THE CHINESE FILM CLASSICS COLLECTION: A CONTINUING SERIES OF HISTORICAL FILMS FROM CHINA'S GOLDEN AGE OF CINEMA distributed in the United States on Region 1 dvd by Cinema Epoch.

Produced by the radical Shanghai Star Production Company in 1937, Shen Xiling's screwball comedy is sprinkled with anti-capitalist social commentary. At that time, China is suffering from Japanese occupation in its northern regions and flattened by massive unemployment and marauding warlords in southern ones. It is not a good time to be seeking a job, as the principal characters in this film are finding out.

One is contemplating a final exit from life as SHI ZI JIE TOU begins. Xu has failed a critical college examination and been discharged from school without matriculating. He is haunted by these shortcomings and an inability to face his supportive family. Only suicide will solve these problems, or so he believes. Teetering at sea's edge in Shanghai Harbor, the gloomy ex-student is saved by the interference of friend and fellow scholar, Zhao. For no discernible reason, his rescuer asserts a completely unfounded optimism, certain that better times will soon arrive. Zhao is an encyclopedia of upbeat clichés, probably gleaned from

pages of motley volumes scattered chaotically throughout his single-room apartment. Even though unable to pay overdue rent, our hero nonetheless brings Xu to his unkempt lodging, encouraging the slighter youth to rest on a rumpled bed inside. Still nursing gloomy malcontent, Xu delivers a pithy line that seems to summarize his personality perfectly: "I am a floating corpse."

Zhao probably agrees tacitly, for the room in which they've settled offers little to nourish occupants. Worse still, a nagging landlady knocks insistently on the door, demanding immediate payment. None is forthcoming, for her lodger has no job at that moment, and barely enough savings to buy a potful of soup. From that pittance he must finance two hungry people.

Xu, knowing he cannot remain, considers a plan to entreat funds from a well-heeled acquaintance who's successfully bought a degree through some academic correspondence course offered by Westerners. If he employs the same strategy, perhaps someday not too remote he can return home carrying a college diploma. Zhao is reluctantly encouraging. Despite misgivings, he doesn't want Xu to lapse back into the dismal state in which he'd first found him.

Their conversation is interrupted by the intrusion of Tang and Liu, two more jobless young men financially adrift in the same metropolis. Chattering cheerfully, Tang informs the others it is his birthday. Look! He has some food to share in celebration. Prospects of full stomachs cause unbridled clamorous festivity, which in turn brings Zhao's unsatisfied landlady back to the room. This time she's compelled to retreat when Tang brazenly fabricates an editorial position for her tenant with a corresponding assured salary.

Since director Xiling wishes to steer his project into deeper comic waters, the four friends are soon reduced to two, with Liu leaving for the North to battle the overrunning Japanese and Xu journeying off to try to locate a funding source for further schooling. That leaves Tang and Zhao as centers of viewer attention.

The latter is temporarily relieved of his financial dilemma by news of a successful job application to a city paper. What is being offered is not the anticipated writing assignment, but an entry-level proofreading position. Still, it pays.

Tang also enjoys a bit of financial uplift, landing a biweekly job as a window dresser at a textile retailer. He and Zhao, upon hearing the good news, inexplicably demolish four plaster sculpted busts Tang had created. Odd, that someone hoping to become a professional artist would care so little about his

creations, particularly if they were intended as prospective sale items. Maybe Tang secretly nurses an ambition to become principal window-dresser at Shanghai's leading department store.

While Zhao is out working, his landlady rents the room beside his to a recent female college graduate who has obtained work as a "coach" in a garment factory. Yang is very young, actually rather too much so for someone with her supposed credentials. She is more of a child, still, than a woman, fond of afternoon naps, girlhood toys and Western dolls.

But a luxurious hour abed is unexpectedly spoiled. Intermittent ploppings on her forehead rouse Yang from sweet slumbers. Investigating their origin, she discovers someone has rudely thrust a bamboo pole draped with wet men's clothing into her new dwelling. Enraged, she pushes the intruding device back into its previous location, spilling overflung garments onto the floor in the process. Then Elder Sister turns up. She has come to aid with unpacking and plans to stay long enough to refurbish Little Sister's dingy living quarters. After a wrestle over diary possession and the spilling of a jewelry box, the two merrymakers settle down briefly to the task of laying out the younger girl's dresses. This requires a hammer, nails supplied willingly by the landlady, and a flimsy plywood wall which inadequately separates Yang's room from the pigpen beside it where Zhao litters indiscreetly when not at work.

Conveniently, her neighbor has been promoted to a night shift writing assignment just about the time Yang rents the adjoining room. So the two girls can pound away undisturbed. Upon accidentally dislodging one of four framed photos of Zhao and his buddies, Elder Sister giggles. The moment of revenge is at hand. She brassily launches a no-survivors attack on any remaining frames attached to the wall. Within a few seconds her bangings send three more crashing to the floor. There, that should teach Mr. Pig to trash other people's bedrooms.

Of course, when Zhao returns to his lodgings, he's a trifle upset to find them messier than he left them. The landlady must have been throwing things around in his absence, just out of spite. Well, he'd show her. Back goes the pole, across the divider and into Yang's territory. A pattern of unneighborly warfare begins, with the two chief combatants each trying to top the other in rudeness.

On the streetcar these two irritable young people share daily, a different routine is established. It seems Yang must use the same trolley in the morning to go to her factory that Zhao takes home from his night job at the newspaper office.

They exchange friendly greetings and gradually begin to flirt, meanwhile continuing their battles on the home front. Since neither is aware yet of the domestic identity of the other, Yang and Zhao see no inconsistency in this. Their shy courtship resembles the wooing of Harold Lloyd in films such as GIRL SHY.

It is only when both lose their jobs due to a failing economy that the two naïve youngsters become aware of their residential propinquity. Sharing a sudden insolvency, they resolve to battle back together as an impecunious, but infatuated couple. Love will conquer all obstacles. This is put rapidly to a test.

Credits for the film are difficult to locate. Unless one happens to be a reader of Chinese. Yuru Wang is reported to be the cinematographer. His contribution is considerable. CROSSROADS frequently plunges forward with Western swiftness, crammed with montages of newsprint tumbling off rollers, a precipitous opening credit sequence of upthrusting Shanghai skyscrapers, diagonal dissolves, dream images created by double exposures, and a multitude of wipes proving that Kurosawa was not the only Oriental fascinated by those continuity accelerators.

Much of the humor is patterned on the romantic comedies of Harold Lloyd and the key plot pivot derives from Frank Capra's Walls of Jericho in IT HAPPENED ONE NIGHT. It's intriguing to find them transferred ably to a Chinese setting. Less compelling are dramatic insertions of patriotic duty and the recurrent theme of suicide. These seem more appropriate to subtler performances by Chaplin and Keaton in masterworks released in the Twenties.

Editing is abrupt, sometimes the result of missing footage. Cinema Epoch's release print runs only 103 minutes, not the full 110 reported by IMDB. A misguidedly attached music track steals abundantly from classics by Tchaikovsky and other Western masters. This at times wildly overintensifies the drama onscreen. It also generates distracting variability in sound recording clarity.

Lighting also poses some problems, with pixel decay appearing along with a brief freeze of the film at approximately the ten minute mark, as well as significant pixel flashpoints at 58 and 62 minutes. The film automatically restarts without prodding after the freeze cited.

Acting is often overly exaggerated, though the 16-year-old Bai Yang makes a charmingly coy female lead. Zhao Dan and Ban Lu are engaging, if somewhat predictable, in their respective roles of Zhao and Tang.

Kudos to the Art Department for its achievement in the decoration of the ultimate slovenly bachelor's apartment. This provides some compensation for the formula-bound script.

CROSSROADS is an enjoyable excursion into classic Chinese comedy. Despite some oppressive political pontificating, it delivers a refreshingly human romance which still maintains audience interest. Recommended for teens and adults, but parents should be cautioned the film contains literary profanity and a recurring suicide theme.