RAISE THE RED LANTERN

Directed by Zhang Yimou.
Written by Yi Chen.
Starring Gong Li and Ma Jingwu.
At the Coolidge Corner Theater.

By Danny Su

For the second straight year, director Zhang Yimou's latest film was nominated for the Academy Award for best foreign film. As with Zhang's A Dao, Raise The Red Lantern tells a compelling and somewhat story of a young woman whose life is destined to be ruined in a male-dominated society. Like A Dao, Raise The Red Lantern is visually spectacular and morally depressing. Although con-

fined to only one major setting, Yimou is able to capture the audience's attention through clever character manipulations. By the film's end, the audience is so depressed about the outcome and so sympathetic toward the char-

acters that they sincerely wish that such a ter-

rible fate will never be inflicted on any other woman.

Set in Northern China in the 1920's, Songlian (Gong Li) quits college after her father has passed away and becomes Zuoquian Chen's (Ma Jingwu) fourth wife. When Songlian, who chooses to walk from her house to Chen's house instead of riding in the wedding carriage, arrives at Chen's house, there is no sign of a celebration, an oxen of things to come. Bound by tradition and inflamed with jealousy, none of the three wives come out to greet the new bride. An old housekeeper welcomes and acknowledges the arrival of Songlian, and he guides her to her new room through the house's elaborate labyrinthine structure. To her surprise, in the long walk from the front door to her room, she doesn't see a single person. The lack of human presence coupled with the absence of a wedding reception create an impersonal atmosphere that prevails throughout the film and makes one really wonder if this is an everyday occurrence.

Every evening, a red lantern is lit in front of the courtyard of the wife Chen chooses to sleep with. Contrary to its traditional symbol-

ism, red is anything but festive in this movie. There is no love among the wives, only hatred. The relationship between Chen and his wives is purely sexual. Rather than helping each other out and raising their status within the family, the wives are constantly fighting among themselves to win favor from Chen. On Songlian's wedding night, Meishan (the Cadle), the third wife, pretends to be sick and calls Chen away for the night. And wher-

ever Chen spends the night with Songlian, Meishan takes him up by singing songs on the roof early in the morning. Although Meishan outwardly displays her dislike of Songlian, she does not plot against her. On the other hand, second wife Zhuoyun (Cao Cuifeng) displays affection for Songlian, but secretly plots to destroy her. According to Meishan, Zhuoyun has a Buddha's face and a sycophant's heart. Even Yan'er (Kong Lin), Songlian's servant, hates her because she wishes to become Chen's mistress someday.

Like A Dao, Raise The Red Lantern embodies numerous messages that Yimou attempts to convey to the Chinese people. It has been criticized in the past by his own people for showing the dark side of China to foreigners, but secretly plots to destroy her. According to Meishan, Zhuoyun has a Buddha's face and a sycophant's heart. Even Yan'er (Kong Lin), Songlian's servant, hates her because she wishes to become Chen's mistress someday.

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