

VARIETY

Film Review: 'Soul on a String'



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Blending Buddhist spiritual elements with classic Western motifs, Zhang Yang's Tibet-set epic features too many storylines to keep straight.

A slow-simmering, Western-style action drama of blood feud, misfired machismo, and spiritual quest spread across Tibet's rolling steppes and scorching deserts, "Soul on a String" follows the travails of a hunter led by fate to deliver a sacred stone to a mythic mountain despite motley foes at his heels. Chinese director Zhang Yang ("Shower," "Sunflower") eschews the thrill of propulsive duels for a discursive allegorical approach, serving up picturesque visuals, highland-dry humor, and karmic plot twists. While the nearly two-and-a-half-hour running time is sure to hamper theatrical release prospects, Zhang's quirky blend of genre and art-house elements should ensure considerable fest play.

The director's second film set in Tibet after his minimalist docudrama "Paths of the Soul" is steeped in fairy-tale color. Its prologue depicts a forest encounter between a young urchin, a deer hunter, and a young girl who falls from a cliff clutching a glowing stone. Like the metafiction of Italo Calvino and Jorge Luis Borges, the meaning of the characters' crossed destinies will be revealed in due course, but their connections remain concealed for so long, the multi-pronged narratives fell obscure and unfocused at first.

The story proper begins with hot-headed wastrel Guori (Zerong Dages) challenging a man called Tabei to a duel to avenge his father's death. "Many people are named Tabei," protests his hapless target, and sure enough, Guori's thirst for revenge doesn't stop with the first Tabei he meets. Both his mother and older brother Kodi (Lei Chen) fear that he's making so many new enemies that their future generations will have to pay dearly for it.

On a parallel quest is Tabei (Kimba), former hunter, ex-con and fugitive. He's revived by a lama (Mima) after being hit by a thunderbolt and told to bring a holy stone to Palm Print Mountain as penance to cleanse his many sins, attracting an odd bunch of followers en route: Chung (Quni Ciren), who decides he's the love of her life after a one-night stand; Pu (Yizi Danzeng), a mute scalawag with psychic powers; Gedan (Siano Dudiom Zahi), a mysterious stalker; Zandui (Solange Nima), a wanderer with a wondrously daffy dog.

Set on vast, vacant landscapes which make past and present indiscernible, the stylized film suggests Westerns in which characters struggle as much against the elements as they do other humans. Even when the men brandish broadswords, their poise and unpolished moves resemble standoffs in gunfights rather than typical Chinese martial arts duels. And yet Zhang offers a twist on generic ideas of vengeance by imbuing every fight with a spiritual dimension. The film's abstract tone slowly gives way to a moving sense of futile longing and tragedy as it explores Tabei's lifelong burden of having to pay for the murder committed by a father he's never met and how that colors his attitude toward love, or Chung's desire to bear his child.

The title refers to the leather string that holds the stone, which Tabei wears around his neck, as well as Chung's habit of counting the days of her romance by tying knots on a leather cord, symbolizing their pilgrimage to free themselves from physical and spiritual bondage. All the protagonists need to let go of their attachments, which according to Buddhist teaching is the root of all suffering. Without straining for heavy mysticism, the epiphany in the denouement skillfully elides time while rendering cause and effect irrelevant.

The performances are uneven, dominated by Kimba and Quni Ciren's passionately willful personalities. Other roles, except the delightfully rascally Yixi Danzeng, tend to be one-dimensional. Gender relations seem to hail from the Dark Ages when men thoughtlessly sowed their wild oats while women, useful only for their cooking and sexual services, stoically raise kids alone.

The standout of the aesthetically pleasing production is Guo Daming's widescreen cinematography, which captures Tibet's stunningly varied terrain of lakes, deserts and mountains with sweeping aerial shots, in dramatic tones of fiery reds and brooding umbers. Zhang Jian score infuses the electric rock score with Tibet folk melodies.

<http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/soul-on-a-string-review-1201803695/>

'Soul On A String': Toronto Review

13 September, 2016 | By David D'Arcy

In *Soul on a String*, directed by Zhang Yang, a brooding loner treks through the Tibetan landscape to find a resting place for a sacred object that he carries on a string. In the tradition of the American western genre which is one of the film's inspirations, some killers are determined to get him before he gets there.

The landscape of Tibet; has rarely looked so striking. It reminds you why the Tibetans are so attached to their land.

This panoramic film – for once the adjective is absolutely precise – won the cinematography award at the 2016 Shanghai Film Festival and *Soul on a String* is visually stunning. It shares a high elevation and the spirit of revenge with *The Revenant*, and its heroine played by Quni Ciren has an irresistible appeal, but this Tibetan-language epic will be a hard sell beyond festivals and specialised audiences. Those who find their way to it will see breathtaking surroundings that shape the film's drama.

At the drama's core – or leading its uphill narrative trail – is Tabei (Kimba), a self-described sinner carrying a sacred stone to cleanse himself of sin at the end of his journey. Tabei doesn't want company, but Chung (Quni Ciren) attaches herself to him, ending up pregnant after she shares his bed. Also along for the ride is diminutive Pu, who can't speak but communicates with high-pitched squeaks and a guitar-like instrument, all serving a mood of magic realism.

The film's central pilgrimage plot, which shifts in and out of the present, has plenty of appendages. Two brothers trail Tabei to avenge the killing of their father. They are so ardently vengeful that they kill another man named Tabei who had nothing to do with the crime. That mistaken killing, the butt of a few jokes, gives you a feel for the film's humor.

Also on the trail are two more brothers, and a solitary traveller, Gedan, with a dog called General who lightens the mood from time to time.

The large cast of *Soul on a String* may confuse those who watch the film without full concentration, but the ensemble brings variety and personalities to a long hike through the landscape – the film runs almost two and a half hours.

As Tabei, Kimba is as trail-hardened as any Western cowboy, and the weak pressures of political correctness in China make it easy to lock him and Quni Ciren into the conventional warrior and camp cook roles. Ciren brings a hard-bitten humor to the role of Chung, and looks radiant when a scene calls for a campfire, even she's wearing filthy animal skins.

Secondary characters don't go much beyond the one- dimensional, a description that could just as easily fit most westerns.

Zhang, who adapted the script with the writer Tashi Dawa (a half-Tibetan writing in Chinese) from several of Tashi Dawa's stories, focuses on Tibetan folklore and honour codes more than on the local Buddhism and history. In this tale of violent revenge, he avoids the high-flying martial art balletics of so many Chinese period dramas. The fight that provides the film's crescendo is downright crude, and seems deliberately so.

Some critics on blogs with a Tibetan nationalist bent have faulted the film for a Chinese prejudice – Zhang is Chinese and Tashi Dawa is half Chinese. If so, this is more by omission than commission, using majestic settings to tell conventional stories of sin and the pursuit of forgiveness in a region with a more urgent political tale to tell.

That criticism could still undermine the film's chances for an audience outside China. The public in North America and Europe that is interested in Tibet tends to look favourably on the Dalai Lama and Tibetan autonomy. That informed audience might just skip this one. That said, the landscape of Tibet, though the lens of DP Guo Daming has rarely looked so striking. It reminds you why the Tibetans are so attached to their land.

<http://www.screendaily.com/reviews/soul-on-a-string-toronto-review/5109413.article>