

‘Real Love Should Make You Cry’

By Michelle Tsai

When I left the theater after watching “If You Are the One,” a Chinese blockbuster released last year, I was bewildered. The movie was billed as a romantic comedy but there had been no long-awaited first kiss—in fact, no kiss at all. Contrary to the Hollywood formula, there was no dramatic buildup to a confession of love. And the finale centered not on a sunset embrace, but on a graphic of the skyrocketing Chinese stock market. What’s the appeal?

Chinese romantic comedies are a downer.

“If You Are the One” is no indie dud, however, but one of China’s highest grossing domestic films of all time, pulling in over 400 million yuan (\$59 million) since its Dec. 22 release last year. It’s a popular date flick for Chinese students and professionals.

But “When Harry Met Sally” it is not. The “romantic comedy” genre means something very dif-

ferent in China than it does in Hollywood. In these movies, love isn’t depicted as the end goal that couples achieve after a protracted struggle, but also as a struggle in its own right. Love is more linked to tragedy than to comedy. Sammy Shan, a graduate student in Beijing, summed up the phenomenon by saying, “Real love should make you cry.”

Take one of the stories in the 2008 ensemble film “Desires of the Heart,” for example. A middle-aged divorcee meets a younger man, but their courtship doesn’t advance through conventional dates. Rather, she falls ill and her counterpart shows his dedication by nursing her back to health after surgery. He helps her with the decidedly unromantic task of going to the toilet; he holds a tissue to her mouth and coos, “It’s okay, spit.” Accepting this affection requires relinquishing one’s dignity—the sort of thing that would appear only as slapstick in a Western romantic comedy

or in a serious drama. The love-as-pain theme that seems to sell so well in China leads to some interesting trends in these movies.

For starters, actually telling someone you love them is usually just a small part of the plot. A typical declaration can be found in “Waiting Alone,” an underground hit from 2005. The male protagonist reveals his affection for his crush as she is about to board a train by saying only, “I’ve gotten used to you after all these years; it won’t be the same without you.” That’s an understatement in any language.

Add to this an emphasis on money and property as key drivers of a relationship. The connection is particularly evident in today’s China, where it’s not uncommon for parents to buy homes for their sons so that

they will be more desirable suitors. Several plot lines in “Desires of the Heart” hinge on characters proving their devotion

Women,” a light-hearted farce that’s been dubbed the Chinese take on “Sex and the City,” ends not with a kiss but a sucker

punch—literally. Love also hurts in “If You Are the One.” Smiley, the female protagonist, slaps her married lover repeatedly in one scene, which he endures without resistance. The love-pain link is taken to the extreme when Smiley attempts suicide after realizing she can’t escape the torturous affair with her lover.

Romantic comedies are fairly new in mainland Chinese cinema. So new, in

fact, that when I asked a friend to name his favorite Chinese romantic comedy, he replied, “Does a romantic comedy have to end with the people together?” In China, the answer is probably no.

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“When Harry Met Sally”: a better choice for Valentine’s Day.

with cold, hard cash and property deeds. In one story, a career girl dreams about her boss, but there’s no bedroom fantasy. Instead, he showers her with 100 yuan (\$15) and \$100 bills, covering her body in red and green. She wakes up panting.

Physical pain is also a common motif. Tsui Hark’s “All About

Masterpiece / By Joseph Epstein

A Yiddish Novel With a Tolstoyan Sweep

Robert Lowell called Ford Madox Ford’s “The Good Soldier” the best French novel in the English language. So, similarly, might one call I.J. Singer’s “The Brothers Ashkenazi” the best Russian novel ever written in Yiddish. The book has the grand sweep of Tolstoy, with a vast and wide-ranging cast of characters, a strong feeling for the movement of history, and, playing throughout, the drama of men and women trapped in the machinery of forces much greater than themselves.

Israel Joshua (I.J.) Singer, born in Bilgoraj, Poland, in 1893, was the older brother by nine years of Isaac Bashevis (I.B.) Singer. The Singers’ father was a Hasidic rabbi, their mother the daughter of a long line of famous *misnagid* (non-Hasidic) rabbis. I.J. Singer spent his adolescent years in Warsaw, where he became caught up in the Haskalah, or Jewish enlightenment, movement. As a young man he worked as a journalist in Kiev, where his early attraction to socialism was punctured by the brute realities of the Russian Revolution. In 1934 he moved to the U.S., where he worked for the Jewish Daily Forward. He published seven books, of which “The Brothers Ashkenazi” (1936) is the best known.

The tension between religious and secular life among Jews born into orthodoxy gave both Singer brothers an inexhaustible literary subject. In much of Isaac Bashevis Singer’s fiction his characters stray from religion and then, after leading lives of dissipation, degradation and disappointment, return to it, where they find a measure of contentment.

For I.J. Singer things are more complicated. He did not think much of either traditional religion or the secular life of his time, which didn’t leave him, as a novelist, a great deal of room to

negotiate. Politics taught I.J. the bitter lesson that, however much the extreme left and the extreme right might disagree, the one common ground upon which they met comfortably was anti-Semitism. The Jew as scapegoat in the dark world of Eastern Europe is more than a leitmotif in “The Brothers Ashkenazi”; it is the underlying moral of the novel. “Don’t you know,” the wives of the striking Jewish workers cry out to their husbands during a bitter strike in Lodz, “it always ends up with Jewish heads bleeding.”

“The Brothers Ashkenazi” begins not long after the Napoleonic wars, with the arrival of German and Moravian weavers in the Polish town of Lodz. At first excluded, the Jews gradually insinuate themselves into the town. They began as small-time entrepreneurs, setting up minor factories or sometimes working in their homes with handlooms, putting in long hours and grinding out a living. A handful of Jews worked for large-scale German factory owners, as agents, buyers, managers.

One such is Abraham Hersh Ashkenazi, who, soon after the novel begins, is presented by his wife with twin sons, Simha Meir and Jacob Bunem. Abraham Hersh hears the prophecy from his rabbi that his sons will both know great wealth. This prophecy, which will come true, is a disappointment to their father, who would have preferred they be pious and learned.

The brothers turn out very differently, in talent and in temperament. Simha Meir, the first born by a few minutes, is from an early age clever, conniving, a boy and then man concentrated on the main chance. His brother is physically more gifted—strong, handsome, charming—a cynosure. Simha Meir is aflame with ambition; Jacob Bunem, less concentrated, is dedicated to easy living.

for exploitation, with every kind of hatred polluting the air.

“Simha Meir had the guts of a pickpocket,” Singer writes. “In Lodz this was the highest compliment.” We learn that “justice isn’t a commodity in Lodz,” and that “Lodz admired nothing more than wealth.” With hundred of dab touches Singer personifies the city as the sinkhole of men set loose without any guiding principles or goals apart from that of gain.

Such idealism as Singer allows in the novel is given to the few revolutionaries who appear in its pages, but theirs turns out to be a naïve revolutionism. Nissan, the son of a poor rabbi, exchanges his father’s devotion to Torah for his own to Marxism, into which he invests the same unshakeable faith. He

lives to see the revolution he fought for turn into a pogrom, with the corpses of Jews hanging from trees. At one point, Nissan thinks: “Maybe man was essentially evil. Maybe it wasn’t the fault of economic circumstances, as he had been taught, but the deficiencies of human character.”

Strikes, World War I, the Russian Revolution, the invasion of Lodz first by the Germans, then by the Russians—all are described by Singer, with pitch perfect artistry and pace. The world turns topsy-turvy, with only Max Ashkenazi’s dream of industrial and financial dominance remaining constant, until it, too, is blasted. Having earlier moved his factory to Russia, he is imprisoned in the new Soviet Union, from which he is saved by his



At the center of “The Brothers Ashkenazi” is the climb of Simha Meir—who later abandons his religion and becomes Max Ashkenazi—to dominance over the weaving industry of Lodz. The machinations behind his climb are set out in impressive detail. In the background plays the subsidiary story of the rivalry and estrangement between the two brothers: Simha Meir, in an arranged marriage, is betrothed and marries the love of his brother’s life. Later Jacob Bunem marries into a family of vast wealth, a cause of consternation to Simha Meir.

Conflict is the order of the day in Lodz. Under capitalism man exploits man, an old saying had it, while under communism just the reverse obtains. So it is in Lodz; no matter who is in command, the city is breeding ground

long-despised brother. On the brothers’ return to Poland, reconciled at last, Jacob Bunem is killed, in an act of anti-Semitic bullying, by an ignorant Polish officer.

“The Brothers Ashkenazi” ends on a pogrom, which sends all the city’s Jews fleeing: to America, to the new Zion recently created in Palestine, to less cruel countries than Poland. “Lodz,” Singer writes, “was like a limb torn from a body that no longer sustained it. It quivered momentarily in its death throes as maggots crawled over it, draining its remaining juices.” Max Ashkenazi, intent on personal reform, which he is unable to attain, dies soon afterward.

Masterly, pitiless, this great novel forgoes a happy ending to render instead a just one: The city of Lodz and the characters it spawned get all they deserve.

Mr. Epstein is the author of “Fred Astaire” (Yale University Press, 2008).

Pepper . . . and Salt

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL



“Sir, just thought I’d remind you—your irony awareness lesson is coming up at 3:00.”