

## Grieving widow reluctantly dates ardent admirer in cross-cultural romance drama

Written by Kam Williams

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### *Shanghai Red* Film Review

Meili Zhu (Vivian Wu) was inconsolable in the wake of the murder of her husband, Lian Wei (Kenny Bee), because she had not only suddenly lost her life partner, but would now have to raise their 7 year-old son, Bebe (Lu Yao), alone. Obviously, we all mourn differently and, in the case of this grief-stricken widow, the loss triggered a passionate reaction that rose to the level of a lust for revenge.

And, as she matter-of-factly states at the outset of *Shanghai Red*, “Sometimes you must do the honorable thing by dishonoring yourself.” So, ordinarily-modest Meili uncharacteristically donned a clingy, crimson dress to pose as a call girl for an escort agency. But this is all a part of her plan for vengeance, as her very first client is her late hubby’s business partner (Roger Yuan), whom she suspects was behind the slaying. Upon entering the hotel room, Meili removes her oversize sunglasses to reveal her true identity to her prey right before pumping him full of bullets.

Unfortunately, crime still does not pay, since Meili narrates this tawdry tale of love and betrayal already behind bars, where all she has to look forward to is periodic visits from her handsome lawyer (Son Hong-lei). For, somehow, Meili always manages to turn the tables on her ineffective attorney during his interrogations so that they end up discussing his troubled marriage instead of planning her defense strategy. Thus, this fascinating flashback flick unfolds in a rather unorthodox, non-linear fashion, with the femme fatale at the center of the story enjoying a jailhouse flirtation when not gradually unraveling the multilayered mystery which led to her imprisonment.

We learn that Meili began having second thoughts soon after the shooting, when she went to visit her Feng (Ge You), the man who had supplied her with both a motive and a murder weapon. “You wanted revenge, I just made it possible,” he protests, washing his hands of any culpability. Meanwhile, Meili, who prefers to focus on being a good mother to her increasingly troubled son, finds herself haunted by visions of her ex’s ghost and by the guilt of having committed such a violent act.

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Then, the answer to her prayers arrives in the person of an American businessman who hires her as a translator. For Michael Johnson (Richard Burgi) is instantly smitten with Meili and is ready to assume the role of surrogate husband and father figure.

Although the attraction is mutual, Meili has reservations, because of their cultural differences. Plus, it doesn't help that Bebe's wise old babysitter Wei Ma (Zhengwei Tong), who had adopted Meili after her parents died, repeatedly discourages her from dating a foreigner.

Juxtaposing a litany of opposing thematic elements, ranging from honor vs. disgrace to tradition vs. modernization to trust vs. duplicity, *Shanghai Red* shapes up like a modern morality play of Shakespearean proportions. The movie marks the directorial debut of Cuba-born Oscar L. Costo (Vivian Wu's real-life husband) whose cleverly-concealed script is guaranteed to keep you guessing up to the whopper of a revelation at the conclusion of this endlessly-intriguing whodunit.

Excellent (4 stars)

Unrated

In English and Mandarin with subtitles.

Running time: 119 Minutes

Studio: Indican Pictures

To see a trailer for *Shanghai Red*, visit:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=phAhl6HhBml>