

PEARLS OF CHINA

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FADE IN

Music: Lyrical, traditional Chinese music.

MONTAGE (ROLL CREDITS)-- PICTURE-PERFECT, POSTCARD CHINA

- The sunrise reddens the rock pinnacles in Guilin.
- A pagoda rises out of a misty, spring garden.
- The pristine Himalayas jut out of the Tibetan plateau.
- The Great Wall of China glows a resplendent gold at sunset.
- A square-sailed junk glides across a remote mountain lake, as the sunset shimmers on the water.

IN CONTRAST, THE DARK UNDERBELLY OF MODERN CHINA

- The shimmering water on the lake dissolves into water on a polluted river, with dead fish rotting on the banks.
- A large pipe vomits industrial waste into a river.
- Endless rows of cars languish in a freeway traffic jam.
- A human sea surges towards a jammed bank of escalators.

EXT. GEJIU, CHINA -- SUNSET

SUPER: GEJIU, CHINA, PRESENT DAY

A grimy, industrial city sags in a valley between dramatic mountains and sharp cliffs, on the edge of a lake. A thick haze of smog smothers the city, as factory smokestacks belch fumes into the murky air.

EXT. CONGESTED LAKEFRONT BOARDWALK IN GEJIU -- DUSK

Choked in traffic, cars honk, spewing diesel fumes. Bicyclists stream by. People cough and spit on the street.

A BEGGAR WOMAN, holding a baby, approaches a gorgeous young couple in western dress, hurrying along the boardwalk.

BEGGAR WOMAN

A coin for my baby? Please.

The woman, LING LIAN, stops and opens her purse.

SHING DESHI [SIGHING]

Hurry up! We're late!

Ling gives the Beggar an apologetic look, and a bill, as her husband, SHING DESHI, whisks her away, disapprovingly.

INT. SWANKY NIGHTCLUB IN GEJIU -- CONTINUOUS

Chuppies (Chinese yuppies) laugh, smoke and drink as western-style Chinese rock music blares through the smoky room

The Hostess ushers Shing and Ling to a table at the edge of the dance floor. Shing's gaze is intelligent, direct and sometimes patronizing. His wife, Ling, is an exquisite Chinese beauty, with large, sensitive eyes.

LING LIAN [SHOUTING OVER THE MUSIC]

Can't we sit a little further away from the dance floor tonight?

SHING DESHI [SHOUTING OVER THE MUSIC]

Why?

LING LIAN
So we can talk.

SHING DESHI
Talk? I want to party!

LING LIAN [POUTY]

We hardly ever get to talk any more.

SHING DESHI
Okay, okay.

The Hostess seats them at a table far from the dance floor. A Waitress sets water on the table and gives them menus.

SHING DESHI (CONT' D)
Fine. Now dance with me!

LING LIAN
I'm tired. Can we order first?

SHING DESHI [STARTING TO DANCE]

Oh c' mon --

LING LIAN [STALLING]

-- And I want to toast your big bonus!

SHING DESHI [RELENTING]

Well, in that case . . .

LING LIAN [RAISING HER WATER GLASS]

Now we'll be the first people on our block to own a flat-screen TV! All our friends will be sooo jealous!

SHING DESHI [RAISING HIS WATER GLASS]

Yeah! Here's to my big fat American paycheck!

They laugh and clink their water glasses.

SHING DESHI
Okay - now let's dance!

He grabs Ling's hand and leads her out to the dance floor.

LING LIAN
Wait a minute --

SHING DESHI
-- you promised!

As they reach the dance floor, the mirrored ball and strobe lighting make the faces of the dancers appear freakish.

LING LIAN
I've gotta sit down.

SHING DESHI [FRUSTRATED]

What's wrong?

LING LIAN
I feel sick.

They return to their seats. Ling smiles, weakly.

SHING DESHI [PICKING UP THE MENU]

You need to eat. Let's order.

LING LIAN
I'm not hungry. I - I think I'm
just tired . . . Can we go home?

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

SHING DESHI
Home? We just got here!

Shing frowns and sets down his menu.

SHING DESHI (CONT' D)
It's Mei Hua, isn't it?

LING LIAN
I can't help it.

Shing puts his hand gently on her arm.

SHING DESHI
Darling, they know what the rules
are. They chose not to play by
them.

Ling removes her arm from under his hand.

LING LIAN [FAINTLY HOARSE]

You can't judge them unless you've been in their position.

SHING DESHI
Well, that'll never happen!

Ling casts her eyes down at the table.

SHING DESHI (CONT' D)
Look, I'm not trying to be hard-
hearted, but China has the One
Child Policy for a reason. We've
got the biggest population in the
world. How else are we gonna
control --

LING LIAN
-- Stop! You sound like such a
bureaucrat when you talk like that!

Shing sighs and shifts his gaze to the dance floor.

LING LIAN [TAKING A DEEP BREATH]

Shing, there's something you need to know.

SHING DESHI [ANNOYED]

What now?

Ling pauses to speak, then is hit by a wave of nausea.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

LING LIAN
I'm gonna throw up!

She rushes to the ladies' room as Shing looks on in bewilderment.

EXT. LONG LU STREET -- CONTINUOUS, NIGHT

Ling and Shing walk toward their row house. Shing carries a bag of take-out food.

LING LIAN
I'm gonna check on Mei Hua.

SHING DESHI
I thought you weren't feeling well.

LING LIAN
I need to know she's okay.

SHING DESHI [SIGHING]

Whatever.

Ling knocks on the front door of Mei and Li's house. The house is dark. There is no answer.

INT. LIVING ROOM OF LING AND SHING -- CONTINUOUS

Ling walks in, troubled. Shing eats his take-out while watching a Chinese horror flick on his new DVD player. Suspenseful Chinese music blares as a woman is being stalked.

LING LIAN [SPEAKING OVER THE MOVIE]

No one's home.

SHING DESHI [WATCHING TV]

What? Oh, so they're out partying.

LING LIAN [WORRIED]

I doubt it.

SHING DESHI [IMPATIENT]

Sit down. Eat. She's fine!

INSERT - TV - A CHINESE HORROR FLICK - NIGHT

A woman is screaming as the stalker attacks her.

WOMAN [ON TV]

No! No! Please! No!

END INSERT - BACK TO SCENE

Ling gazes at the TV, as the woman's screams wash over her.

LING LIAN [TO HERSELF]

Mei Hua, where are you? Are you OK?

The screams from the horror flick fade into real screams from a woman in labor.

EXT. FAMILY PLANNING CENTER, GEJIU -- CONTINUOUS, NIGHT

Halos of haze surround streetlights in downtown Gejiu. A concrete, two-story building has a sign on it in Mandarin.

SUPER (English translation): "FAMILY PLANNING CENTER"

The camera tracks from the sign into the building, past the jail cell on the first floor, up the stairs, down the dingy second floor hallway with two bored Guards standing watch, and into the operating room, until it finds the source of the screams: a woman in labor.

INT. OPERATING ROOM -- CONTINUOUS, NIGHT

A beautiful young woman, MEI HUA, is in the final stages of labor -- sweating, breathing rhythmically, and moaning.

MIDWIFE [ENCOURAGING]
Push! . . . Push!

DOCTOR (ENTERING THE ROOM)
Done?

MIDWIFE
Almost.

DOCTOR [EXHAUSTED]
Good.

Mei cries and moans between pushes. She is shaking with exhaustion. Her concerned husband, LI HO, holds her hand. The baby's head crowns.

MIDWIFE [TO DOCTOR]

It's crowning.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

MEI HUA

My baby!

MIDWIFE [TO MEI, SUDDENLY HARSH]

Push!

Mei clenches her teeth and her fists. Red in the face, she screams as she pushes. The baby's entire head squeezes out, face up - a full-term, healthy baby. The baby opens its eyes and moves its mouth, as if to nurse. The Midwife gasps.

MIDWIFE

Oh, no!

The Midwife looks sheepishly at the Doctor.

MIDWIFE (CONT'D)

It's alive!

DOCTOR [ANNOYED]

Crap! You missed the brain.
Syringe. Quick!

The Doctor pulls on his surgical gloves and mask. The Midwife inserts a syringe into a bottle.

INSERT -- THE BOTTLE

The bottle says "FORMALDEHYDE" in Mandarin characters.

SUPER (English translation) - "FORMALDEHYDE"

BACK TO SCENE

Mei watches the Midwife prepare the fatal injection.

MEI HUA

Please, no! Let our baby live!

Li steps between the Midwife and the Doctor.

LI HO

Please! Don't do this! Don't hurt
her! Please! We'll do anything!

DOCTOR [TO LI HO]

You promised to be quiet!

(to mid-wife)

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Get him out of here!

With her elbow, the Midwife presses a red button next to the light switch. Two guards appear and drag Li out.

LI HO

No! Please let me stay!

The door slams shut. Li's wails echo down the hall. The Midwife hands the syringe to the Doctor. The Doctor feels for the baby's soft spot and is about to inject it with formaldehyde. Sobbing, Mei begins to contract and push again. The baby's head moves in the Doctor's hand, so that he misses the soft spot. The baby is looking up in wonder at the Doctor's face. Her arms are now out of the birth canal, and her tiny hand reaches up slowly to grasp the Doctor's finger.

DOCTOR [TO MEI HUA]

Hold still!

Mei's baby takes her first breath.

MEI HUA

NO! NO! PLEASE! NO!

The Midwife slaps Mei hard in the face. Mei howls in pain.

MIDWIFE

Stop pushing! Doctor said hold still!

The Doctor again aims the needle at the baby's soft spot.

DOCTOR [WITH MOIST EYES]

Do you think I enjoy this? Is this why I went to medical school? Foolish women like you force me to do this!

Mei's baby begins to cry. The Doctor injects formaldehyde into the baby's brain. At first the baby shrieks, struggles and convulses in pain. Then she goes limp. The Midwife pulls the tiny, limp body out of the birth canal and cuts the umbilical cord. Mei sees her baby for the first time.

MEI HUA [CRYING]

It's a girl! My daughter!

The Doctor removes his gloves and mask.

DOCTOR [EYES STILL MOIST]

There's nothing I can do. You can't have a baby without a Birth Permit.

MEI HUA [HYSTERICAL]

You're not a doctor, you're a monster!

DOCTOR [DRAINED]

I have no choice. It's everyone's duty to control the population.

The Doctor shuffles out and shuts the door, a defeated man.

MEI HUA [TEARS STREAMING]

Please, please, let me hold my baby!

Now that the Doctor is out of the room, the Midwife shows compassion. She gently places the baby in Mei's arms.

MIDWIFE [QUIETLY]

I'm sorry I slapped you.

Mei cradles the baby on her breast. The baby looks peaceful.

MEI HUA [SOBBING]

My pearl, my precious little pearl!

EXT. LONG LU STREET -- LATE AFTERNOON, NEXT DAY

Ling carries a soup tureen out her front door. She hurries up to Mei and Li's house.

EXT. LI'S FRONT DOOR -- CONTINUOUS, LATE AFTERNOON

Ling knocks, softly. There is no answer. She looks concerned. Finally, she knocks again, loudly this time.

INT. LI'S LIVING ROOM -- CONTINUOUS, LATE AFTERNOON

Mei stares blankly out the window. Her hair is greasy and her clothes are rumpled. Her skin is pallid, sickly. She has a bruise on her cheek where the Midwife slapped her. The sharp knock breaks the silent pall in the house. Off camera, Li opens the door and greets Ling.

LING LIAN [TO LI HO] (O.S.)

I brought soup.

(CONTINUED)

CONTINUED:

Ling enters and places the soup tureen on a table near Mei.

LI HO [WHISPERING TO LING]

She won't eat. She just stares.

Li leaves the room. Mei is still staring out the window.

LING LIAN [HUGGING MEI]

Mei Hua, I'm so sorry . . . !

Staring out the window, Mei doesn't respond to the hug.

MEI HUA [SLOWLY, QUIETLY]

You have no idea what it's like to become pregnant, to fall in love with your baby, to imagine how her hair will smell as she sleeps with her head on your neck.

Mei's lips begin to tremble.

MEI HUA

And then to have her ripped out of your body and murdered in front of your eyes. Just because you don't have a piece of paper -- a Birth Permit. We were just one year under the age requirement. You cannot imagine what this feels like.

Tears slide silently out of Mei's eyes.

LING LIAN [SOFTLY]

Yes, Mei Hua. I can imagine.

MEI HUA [DISTANTLY]

How? How can you?

Ling closes her eyes for a long moment, then opens them. Her eyes betray a mixture of excitement and terror.

LING LIAN [WHISPERING]

Mei Hua . . . I'm pregnant!

Mei turns slowly, as if coming out from behind a veil, and looks at Ling for the first time.

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For the complete script please contact Jennifer Brooks at
info@filmmakers.com