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Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (France/China, 2002)

A movie review by James Berardinelli

Can a great work of literature change a person's life? Whether or not you believe so, writer/director Dai Sijie, adapting his own novel (How many filmmakers can make that claim?), clearly does. The problem with the movie *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is that he never convinces us of his thesis. Dai's approach impacts our ability not only to believe that the title character has been fundamentally changed, but causes the film's central romance to seem no more substantive than a diversion.

The film takes place during the Cultural Revolution, a recent period in Chinese history that has proven to be fertile ground for a number of good movies. (The most searing of these was arguably Joan Chen's *Xiu Xiu*) It is 1971, and friends Luo (Chen Kun) and Ma (Liu Ye) have been sent to a rural mountain village for "re-education." Ma is an artistic-minded intellectual and Liu is the son of a "reactionary dentist" (who once worked on the mouth of Chiang Kai-shek). Ma's violin is about to be consigned to the fire that consumes all frivolous things until Ma uses it to play Mozart, and pretends that the music is an anthem hailing Chairman Mao's greatness. This, of course, makes it acceptable.

Shortly after Luo and Ma's arrival, they meet the Little Chinese Seamstress (Zhou Xun), who is visiting from a nearby village with her father, the Old Tailor (Cong Zhijun). Both young men are entranced by her beauty, and they are soon inventing reasons to enjoy her company. By happenstance, they discover a cache of "forbidden" books (Balzac, Flaubert, and the like), and begin reading these to the Little Chinese Seamstress, who has exhibited a fondness for hearing stories. Her feelings for Luo are stronger than those for Ma, and soon the latter is composing songs while his friends are frolicking naked in a pond.

The film is beautifully shot (by Jean-Marie Derujou) – the mountains are breathtaking and there are occasions when the background draws our attention from the dramatic focus of a scene. That's not to denigrate the performances, which are uniformly good, but to indicate how amazing the scenery is, and how well its majesty has been captured.

As a romance, *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* is weak. It lacks both passion and conviction. We figure out that Luo and the Little Seamstress are in love because the film tells us as much. But we don't *feel* it. In fact, one could make a case that Ma's unrequited emotions come across more strongly than Luo's, which are acted upon. (To be fair, Ma is the narrator, so things are being presented from his point-of-view.)

The ending is not well realized. The Little Seamstress' decision seems sudden and arbitrary, and makes no sense if we are to believe that her connection with Luo is deeper than a brief dalliance. According to her, Balzac and the other books have changed her, but there's no evidence of it. Again, we're supposed to believe is because we're told that's the case. It may be that great literature has this kind of transformative power, but Dai's film hasn't made me a believer.

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress moves briskly, unfolding in a series of loosely connected episodes. Even if the overall storyline is unconvincing, many of the incidents work on their own merits, like filmed short stories. The epilogue offers little in the way of closure, even though it tries to tie off as many strands as possible without seeming overly contrived. *Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress* offers its share of little pleasures, but falls short of the greatness to which it aspires.

Balzac and the Little Chinese Seamstress (France/China, 2002)

Director: Dai Sijie ([http://www.reelviews.net/search/director/Dai Sijie](http://www.reelviews.net/search/director/Dai+Sijie))

Cast: Chen Kun ([http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Chen Kun](http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Chen+Kun)), Liu Ye ([http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Liu Ye](http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Liu+Ye)), Zhou Xun ([http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Zhou Xun](http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Zhou+Xun)), Wang Shuanbao ([http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Wang Shuanbao](http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Wang+Shuanbao)), Cong Zhijun ([http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Cong Zhijun](http://www.reelviews.net/search/actor/Cong+Zhijun))

Screenplay: Dai Sijie, based on his novel ([http://www.reelviews.net/search/screenplay/Dai Sijie](http://www.reelviews.net/search/screenplay/Dai+Sijie), based on his novel)

Cinematography: Jean-Marie Derujou ([http://www.reelviews.net/search/cinematography/Jean-Marie Derujou](http://www.reelviews.net/search/cinematography/Jean-Marie+Derujou))

Music: Wang Pujian ([http://www.reelviews.net/search/music/Wang Pujian](http://www.reelviews.net/search/music/Wang+Pujian))

U.S. Distributor: Empire Pictures

Run Time: 1:51

U.S. Release Date: -

MPAA Rating: "NR" (Sexual Situations, Profanity) (<http://www.reelviews.net/search/mpaa/NR>)

Genre: DRAMA (<http://www.reelviews.net/search/genre/DRAMA>)

Subtitles: English subtitled Mandarin Chinese

Theatrical Aspect Ratio: 2.35:1

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(There are no more worst movies of Liu Ye)

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