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BLIND SHAFT (Film)

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BLIND SHAFT

KINO INTERNATIONAL/Color/1.85/Dolby SR/92 Mins./
Not Rated

Cast: **Li** Yixiang, Wang Shuangbao, Wang Baoqiang, An Jing, Baa Zhenjiang, Sun Wei, Zhao Junzhi, Wang Yining, Liu Zhenqi, Zhang Lulu, **Li** Yan, Zhao Hang, Nie Weihua, Cao **Yang**, Jian Chengwen, Zhi Lei.

Credits: Produced and directed by **Li Yang**. Screen-play by **Li Yang**, based on the novel Sacred Wood by Liu Qingbang. Director of photography: Liu Yonghong. Production designer: **Yang** Jun. Edited by **Li Yang**, Karl Riedl. Costume designer: Wang Xiaoyan. A **Li Yang** Filmworkshop/Tang Splendour Films production, in association with Bronze Age Films. In Mandarin with English subtitles.

Excellent drama revealing the terrible, often fatal working conditions in Chinas coal mines. 04-50

In 2002, 27 coal miners died in mining accidents in the United States. In China, official figures put the dead at just under 7,000 miners that same year. Unofficial Chinese sources and human-rights organizations claim that 10,000 coal miners die each year in China, where coal is the main source of energy. Like Western Europe and America over a century ago, China is in the throes of an industrial revolution. Recognition of workers' rights, the establishment of labor standards, and other regulatory issues to protect working people are lagging behind the push to industrialize. It is this exigent plight that **Li Yang's Blind Shaft** chronicles.

Li, who was born in China, received his film training in Germany, and produced three documentaries while he was a student there. **Blind Shaft**, which is banned in China, marks his feature debut. The fledgling filmmaker's purpose is to spotlight his country's lack of safety standards in the mines, but the opprobrium he so sedulously illustrates in **Blind Shaft** has more to do with the moral declivity that industrialization engenders: **Yang's** protagonists, Song and Tang, are itinerant workers who scam mine owners by killing a colleague and claiming it was an accident. They then collect the death benefit, which is actually hush money, saying that the worker was a

relative of theirs. Owners pay up quickly for fear of being closed down or of attracting inspectors to their mines. The mines, managed by local party bosses, are often illegal and workers are ill-equipped--gripping rudimentary tools, they descend in rickety, makeshift elevators and drag coal from the depths of the mine in donkey-driven carts.

For *Li*, few distinctions mark the blackness of the mine and the Stygian universe of workaday China. His miners, Song and Tang, ascend for trips to the brothel, and Song to wire money to his son who must pay for high school. Neither man envisions a future different from the life they now lead until Tang recruits a 16-year-old boy, Yuan, as their next victim. Yuan left school because his father, who went in search of work, is now missing, and he must support his mother and sister. Song is wary of the boy, partly because he has the same name as their last victim--a bad omen, he tells Tang. Tang scoffs at Song's objections and the men and the boy go in search of work after getting Yuan false identity papers.

For *Li*, who crafts an unforgettable parable, Yuan's entrance into the story marks its real beginning--it is through the boy that we understand the despoiling of China, the loss of family unity and the resulting depravity and lawlessness, the "*blind shaft*" through which *Li* sees his homeland falling. In a resolute and straightforward style reminiscent of Italian neorealism, the writer-director tells his story; a diorama lit by China's setting sun, in which Yuan's eventual good fortune marks the beginning of his moral degeneration.

Blind Shaft exposes, in graphic detail, an aspect of China that many have come to regard as positive--Red China is now capitalist Nirvana, the biggest growth market in the world. While some recent Chinese films have bemoaned the loss of traditional values in the wake of Westernization--such as Zhang Yimou's *Happy Times*--none has provided so complete an ethnographic picture. Never have Western audiences glimpsed this side of Chinese working life, nor the criminality industrialization has spawned in that sprawling nation. *Blind Shaft* is an auspicious first feature; although relentlessly benighted, it is nevertheless beautifully filmed and well-acted.

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By Maria Garcia

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