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Shower

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Section: Film Reviews
(XIZAO)

(DRAMA -- CHINESE)

A Xi'an Film Studio/**Zhang** Peimin presentation of an Imar Film Co. production. (International sales: Fortissimo Film Sales, Amsterdam.) Produced by Peter Loehr. Executive producers, Sam Duann, Dean Shueh. Directed by **Zhang Yang**. Screenplay, **Zhang**, Liu Fendou, Huo Xin, Diao Yinan, Cai Xiangjun.

Liu Zhu XuDaming Pu CunxinErming Jiang WuLin Li DingWu Feng ShunHe Zheng He BingMiao Zhuang Du PengWang Fang Sui YongqingZhang Jinhao Hu Beibei

(Mandarin dialogue)

The old and new Chinas meet and mingle in "**Shower**," a gently humorous and remarkably moving elegy to community and friendship in which the message comes as much from the performances as anything explicit in the dialogue. Set among the denizens of an old-style Beijing bathhouse that's due to be demolished, pic is the third and artiest of fledgling Beijing indie Imar Film's slate to date; paradoxically, it could turn out to be its breakthrough title with fests and quality buyers.

Young director **Zhang Yang**, who cut his teeth on musicvids and in theater, beats the sophomore curse in this ensembler, which builds impressively on his skill with actors shown in his debut pic, the episoder "Spicy Love Soup." Though the movie is a character piece, sans flashy emoting, **Zhang** keeps things moving and doesn't test his audience's patience, building to a simple, almost offhand ending in which --- with true Chinese practicality --- life is shown to go on after all.

After a funny opening hook, pic locates itself in the winding alleys of fast-disappearing old Beijing, where a bathhouse, once a center of the neighborhood, services its remaining, mostly aged customers.

The men sit around drinking tea, playing chess or gambling over dueling crickets, between times

soaking in the big tiled pools. The roof leaks, and the boilers are almost pre-industrial in this home-away-from-home which is effectively a community center, run with avuncular calm by Liu (veteran Zhu Xu).

Into this time-warp oasis walks Liu's elder son, Daming (Pu Cunxin), who left years ago to make money down south in Shenzhen and who has come back for a visit, believing his dad is dead. Daming feels uneasy in this cellular-less environment, now prefers southerners' **showers** rather than northerners' baths, and can't even relate to his younger brother, Erming (Jiang Wu, from "A Beautiful New World"), who's mentally retarded and helps out in the bathhouse but lives in his own fantasy world.

When Erming briefly goes missing one day, Daming and his father achieve a kind of rapprochement ("I've already lost one son," blurts out the old northerner, referring to Daming; "I can't lose the other"), and decides to stay on a while as his childhood roots begin to exert a pull and he hears the bathhouse is due to be pulled down in a few weeks. Then, a sudden turn of events thrusts Daming into center stage.

One of the strengths of the movie is that it's not just an obvious elegy for a passing way of life. It would have been easy to have made Daming an unsympathetic yuppie-come-home, symbolizing China's race for modernity and indifference toward preserving the past.

In fact, the film is more about broader values like forgiveness and coming together --- also the central theme of another new Chinese pic, **Zhang** Yuan's "Seventeen Years" --- not only between father and son, but also the other characters: the feuding **Zhang** (Hu Beibei) and his sharp-tongued wife, two proud old friends (Li Ding, Feng Shun) who fall out after a petty argument over their crickets, and an indebted businessman who initially takes Daming as an easy touch.

Knitting the film together is the almost magical property that water holds for the old father --- revealed halfway through in a striking shift of locale that moves the emotional goal posts of the picture. Kudos goes here to the pic's sound crew and d.p. **Zhang** Jian, whose cool, turquoise-tinted lensing of the bath scenes is a major asset throughout.

Zhu (the old man in Wu Tianming's "King of Masks") quietly commands the movie without dominating it, exemplified in a sequence in which he faces off some hoods with a display of Old World manners. Pu reins his businessman character back with considerable skill, and Jiang (younger brother of big-time star Jiang Wen) is equally restrained as the younger son.

Among the others, Hu rates mention as the husband who has good reason to hide from his wife, as does the late Feng as the elder of the two cricket rearers. A veteran of over 200 pics, Feng here makes his final performance.

Tech credits are thoroughly pro, and the running time about right. Only a late section in which Erming is briefly put in a clinic impedes the natural flow.

Camera (color), **Zhang** Jian, Bi'er; editor, **Yang** Hongyu; music, Ye Xiaogang; art director, Tian Meng; costumes, Hao Ge; sound (Dolby), Lai Qizhan; artistic consultant, Tang Sifu; assistant directors, Liang Zhenya, Lu Xiaoyou. Reviewed at Cineplex Odeon Varsity, Toronto, Sept. 8, 1999. (In Toronto Film Festival --- Contemporary World Cinema; also in San Sebastian, competing, Pusan, Vancouver and Hawaii festivals.) Running time: 95 MIN.

With: Jin Zhao, **Yang** Zichun, Fang Zheng, Liu Xiyuan, Miao Defa, Qiao Fengwei.

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By Derek Elley

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