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The Cultural Divide, in Cosmology and Life

By STEPHEN HOLDEN

The title of [“Dark Matter,”](#) a melodrama set in academia, is both a scientific concept and a blunt metaphor. Technically, it refers to a form of matter that makes up most of the universe but can’t be directly observed. Applied to human affairs, it evokes the unconscious mind and the hidden, destructive forces within relationships.

Specifically, the story, inspired by a tragic incident involving a Chinese student at the [University of Iowa](#) in 1991, addresses East-West cultural miscommunication. As one character muses, in China astrology is considered a science, and indoor plumbing a luxury. In the United States, visiting students are appalled to discover, many children put their aging parents in retirement homes rather than care for them as they would in China.

“Dark Matter,” directed by [Chen Shi-Zheng](#) from a screenplay by [Billy Shebar](#), is a movie of ideas that does an exemplary job of translating scientific speculation into layman’s language. The filmmaking style of Mr. Chen, an internationally renowned opera director (still best known for his 20-hour “Peony Pavilion” at [Lincoln Center](#) in 1999), is considerably more formal than American audiences are accustomed to. And that formality keeps you at a distance.

The film is divided into five chapters, each titled after a different element. The ethereal voices of the Beijing Angelic Choir, singing a cappella Chinese-language renditions of songs like [“Beautiful Dreamer,”](#) become a kind of Greek chorus underscoring the cross-cultural divide. Excerpts from [“Tosca”](#) and [“Madama Butterfly”](#) are incongruously used as explicit plot pointers.

The film’s protagonist, Liu Xing ([Liu Ye](#)), a brilliant student of cosmology from Beijing University, is one of several elite students chosen by the Chinese government to study in the United States. He becomes the protégé of Jacob Reiser ([Aidan Quinn](#)), a leading cosmology professor. Liu, who speaks in stumbling English, is obsequiously worshipful of his mentor, who (in a running joke) insists that Liu call him Jake; to Liu the notion of addressing an academic deity by his nickname is unthinkable.

In letters to his mother, shown toiling as a laborer in grimy industrial settings, Liu writes of his academic triumphs. But as the initially harmonious relationship between him and Reiser begins to

sour, Liu, who dreams of winning the [Nobel Prize](#) and marrying a blond American, starts telling fantasies.

The unraveling begins when Liu innocently challenges Reiser's theories about dark matter and the Big Bang theory, foolishly imagining that Reiser will be impressed by his originality of thought. Reiser, offended by what he views as Liu's disloyalty and feeling his own career threatened by Liu's radical theories, angrily lectures him about waiting for his turn and being a team player. Then he sets about sabotaging his protégé's future. The consequences are dire.

The story contrasts the stubborn Liu with another Chinese student who plays the game, speaks English beautifully and assimilates into American society. If Liu's intellectual idealism is unimpeachable, he has no psychological insight. He develops an unrequited crush on an airhead waitress at a tea shop, who initially confuses cosmology with cosmetology.

As they become better acquainted, Liu demonstrates scientific principles by examining cream poured into coffee. When the waitress says that she believes in God, he replies that the Big Bang of creation was not the beginning of the universe but a major event in a universe that is eternal, an idea that in his view is not incompatible with the concept of an eternal creator.

It is stimulating to hear these ideas in a movie with an academic setting that shows genuine respect for learning. "Dark Matter," with its view of cutthroat politics and competing egos inside a university, is also laudable in its refusal to soft-pedal the viciously petty side of the academic fishbowl.

The one American who bridges the gap between East and West is Joanna Silver ([Meryl Streep](#)), a wealthy patron of Chinese culture and an unofficial counselor to the visiting students, who takes a maternal interest in Liu. Although Ms. Streep, whose character is shown practicing tai chi, is a warm, welcoming presence in the movie, her character is ultimately extraneous. She is there because she's a star.

"Dark Matter" is rated R (Under 17 requires accompanying parent or adult guardian) for language, some sex and a scene of violence.

DARK MATTER

Opens on Friday nationwide.

Directed by [Chen Shi-Zheng](#); written by [Billy Shebar](#), based on a story by Mr. Chen and Mr. Shebar; director of photography, Oliver Bokelberg; edited by Pam Wise and Michael Berenbaum; music by Van Dyke Parks; production designer, Dina Goldman; produced by Mary Salter, Andrea Miller and Janet Yang; released by First Independent Pictures. Running time: 1 hour 30 minutes.

WITH: [Meryl Streep](#) (Joanna Silver), [Liu Ye](#) (Liu Xing), [Aidan Quinn](#) (Jacob Reiser) and [Blair Brown](#) (Hildy).

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