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Dark Matter 2008, Movie, R, 88 mins

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Dark Matter: Review



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★★★★★

Winner of the Alfred P. Sloan Prize at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival-- an award given to films featuring scientific themes -- this hypnotic, culturally pertinent drama is based on the troubling real-life story of Gang Lu, a promising Chinese student in the U.S. who, in 1991, went down in flames, taking several innocent people with him.

Having completed his undergraduate studies in Beijing, brilliant young Chinese cosmology student Liu Xing (Liu Ye) has moved to the U.S. in hopes of earning his PhD at a large American university.

After getting his doctorate, Liu Xing has one definite goal in mind: to one day win the Nobel Prize for his groundbreaking work in the area of "dark matter." Liu Xing is enraptured with this cutting-edge hypothesis that theorizes the vast bulk of the universe is made up of matter that can't be seen, but the presence of which can be detected by its gravitational effects. It's an ambitious plan, but so far Liu Xing is off to a good start: His high score on the university's qualifying exam catches the attention of renowned theorist Jacob Reiser (Aidan Quinn) -- the man behind the famous "Reiser Model" of the early universe -- who asks Liu Xing to join his cosmology research group. Reiser depends heavily on young, eager and overwhelmingly Chinese research assistants like Liu Xing for fresh ideas, but he doesn't bother much with dark matter -- he has too much invested in his own model to allow for such speculative theory. But rather than threaten his idol's work, Liu Xing believes dark matter can solve the flaws in the Reiser Model, and he plans to write his dissertation on the subject. But for all his academic promise and early success, Liu Xing is having trouble assimilating into life outside the university, despite the charitable efforts of university patron Joanna Silver (Meryl Streep). The wealthy wife of an American businessman (Bill Irwin) with business interests in China, Joanna is an inveterate lover of all things Chinese and she does her best to make sure each new arrival to the university receives a warm welcome. Joanna is particularly drawn to Liu Xing, but her attention isn't enough to alleviate his isolation, or his growing sense that fitting in, becoming as "American" as possible and above all, playing university politics with egotistical academic stars have more to do with success than the quality of one's work. As his professional disappointments begin to mount, so does his drinking, his alienation and his anger. Liu Xing has become a ticking time bomb.

Written by Billy Shebar and directed by opera director Chen Shi-Zheng, this visually sophisticated film has been criticized for turning a deeply disturbed individual into a "hero," but nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, Shebar, Chen and particularly Liu Ye, who gives a quietly powerful performance as Liu Xing, show how cultural dislocation can result in tragedy, and will continue to do so in our increasingly globalized society. By the film's explosive end, the idea of dark matter becomes a complex and fitting symbol for Liu Xing and, by extension, his real-life counterparts: They go virtually unseen by the world around them until the forces they unleash become too strong to ignore. [leave a comment](#) --Ken Fox

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