

MEDITATION PARK

(Dir. Mina Shum, 2017 – 94mins)

By Elena Lazic

Tales of wifely devotion and self-sacrifice feature rather prominently in the movies, and with good reason: dictated by sexist traditions that often appear grotesque through the reductive lens of the camera, they are often full of drama, tragedy and pain. Mina Shum's *Meditation Park* starts as one such stories, focusing on a woman whose very *raison d'être* is the wellbeing of her husband.

Such punishing lifestyles often constitute one half of a contract based on a promise of mutual support and dependency: if he brings food to the table, then she will do pretty much everything else, and vice-versa. This symbiotic relationship is even more intense and fundamental here, in the case of Maria (Cheng Pei-Pei) and Bing (Tzi Ma): when they moved to Vancouver from China some forty years ago to build a better life for their children, each was to the other their only landmark, the one familiar thing in a foreign country they didn't know. But while Bing had to mingle with the outside world to make a living for the both of them, and thus fulfill his part of the contract, nothing required Maria to ever leave the house for anything other than the weekly shopping run. She never had to meet anyone or even learn English properly. Now in her sixties, her only real contact with the outside world is her daughter Ava (Sandra Oh), a young woman who is by contrast — and also, we sense, by consequence — very well integrated into Canadian culture.

Maria doesn't especially mind this way of living. After all, it is all she's ever known, and everybody does it, as far as she's aware — although that isn't far at all. She only begins to question it when she accidentally finds out that Bing has not been fair: while tidying up his clothes, she finds a pair of sexy underwear in his jacket pocket.

This is a scenario we've seen a billion times, but Maria does not handle it the way most characters in her situation usually do. Of course, there is the initial moment of shock and sadness, soon followed by curiosity and bitterness. But she does not linger on those negative emotions or melodramatically revel in self-pity. After a very short while, Maria simply, pragmatically, and with great resolve, begins to consider her options. If this contract is terminated, what will she do with all her time now?

If her reaction might seem surprising, even a little unrealistic at first, that is because this scenario has rarely been explored with sexagenarian characters. Her can-do attitude isn't a quirky narrative development — Maria is no manic pixie dream girl — nor is it empowering for empowerment's sake. Rather, it is the reaction of a mature woman who has learned to be sensitive without being sentimental, disappointed without being broken, hurt without letting pain define her.

Maria's remarkably logical approach to life is also due to the fact that love at 60 is different from love at 20. Forty years into a marriage, your significant other has long come down from the pedestal in your heart and regained their status as just a person. Love doesn't disappear, but it morphs into a more mundane and everyday reality, something that is hard to separate from everything else in your life. At no moment do we get the sense that Maria's feelings for Bing change.

But did she ever really love him, the way people in movies usually love each other? There is something more complex — and perhaps less pretty — at play here. Maria's relatively calm approach to the situation seems indeed partly due to the very nature of her marriage. Admirably and refreshingly, Shum does not shy away from that aspect of their relationship. During a particularly virulent dinner scene, then again when Bing comes home angry because his mistress refuses to see him again, he appears in an unflattering light, yet Maria doesn't seem to care: she seems simply used to it. Her eventual disinterest in "getting him back" suggests she really does not care about him the way we might expect her to. Shum does not judge the couple's old fashioned conception of marriage, and does not try to reassure the audience about it: it is simply a fact of these characters, and just like Maria's daughter, we cannot do anything but wish them the best.

Another betrayed wife might have dramatically left her husband, unable to share a house or a bed with him ever again, and we might wish Maria would do the same. But in her less dramatic, more inventive solution is a different kind of strength, independence and wisdom. Shum lets her character take over the film, subvert our expectations, and be her own master.