

JET FUEL REVIEW BLOG

Moriarty is a Hypnotist? A Mysterious Analysis

December 1, 2018 Editor

After recently renewing my Netflix subscription, I thought I'd explore Netflix's mystery genre, see what gems I could exhume. As far as Netflix mysteries go, I usually stick to *Sherlock* and *Psych*, even *X-Files* (which is no longer on the streaming platform, for shame Netflix!), but this time, I branched out to international films. When I saw 2014 Chinese film, *The Great Hypnotist* (also known as Cui mian da shi) and its premise, I was immediately drawn in. The film is an international drama, thriller, and psycho-mystery directed by Leste Chen and written by Peng Ren and Leste Chen that follows hypnotherapist Dr. Xu's treatment with a puzzling patient. I've always been fascinated by the concept and treatment of hypnotherapy, of how the mind can be convinced to eat less, smoke less, be less anxious. While I was trying to vicariously live through his patients to understand this hypnotherapy experience, I found myself approached by a psycho-mystery with a plot and characters that appeared to be inspired by detective fiction formats.



The entirety of the film revolves around the practice of hypnotherapist Dr. Xu; the first minutes of the movie taking viewers through his hypnotherapy session with a woman who's being mentally haunted by a young woman—whose styling was very similar to the TV-ghost-girl in *The Ring*—a young woman she believes is trying to steal her child from her. Actually, the whole movie begins quite horrifically as the opening shot shows the young woman looking through the glass of a door, trying to break in. She's trapped by this door's frame, giving the audience this sense of entrapment and claustrophobia. As we watch further, we realize that the young woman following the older woman and the child through dark and deserted buildings was all part of a trance of Dr. Xu's patient. The silence and the empty, open spaces in these starting scenes assist in building a thrilling experience for the viewer. We get a sense that these patients who visit Dr. Xu feel haunted by their experiences and wrongdoings and that Dr. Xu, as their hypnotherapist, is meant to exorcise their inner demons.



The Great Hypnotist begins with this haunting and claustrophobic shot, the product of Charlie Lam's cinematography and Leste Chen's direction.

And as we enter the film, we take Dr. Xu to be the Great Hypnotist as he helps his patient in her battle with the young woman trying to rob her child and presents before college students on his psychiatric processes—his ethos established early on for the audience. In relating this to elements and trends of mystery, Dr. Xu's character acts as a hypno-Sherlock with his extensive knowledge and expertise in the practice.

He's even approached at the film's start to work on a difficult "case" or patient that other doctors have not been able to succeed with. Here we are given the problem that must be resolved in this mystery—curing an incurable patient. This difficult patient in *The Great Hypnotist*, is similar to moments in detective fiction where a brilliant detective's help, such as Sherlock Holmes, is sought out when a case becomes too complicated and impossible for law enforcement. Dr. Xu even has the same air of pompous arrogance prominent in detective fiction figures like Hercule Poirot and Sherlock Holmes.

More detective fiction formats appear when we finally meet the incurable patient, a woman named Ren Xiaoyan who claims to see dead people, and who doctors have diagnosed with delusions. We are given Ren's recounts of her ghostly experiences where those passed have shared with her locations of hidden items and in the case of the ghost of a kidnapped girl, where to find her murderer and recover her dead body. Ren's recollections remind me of the moments in detective fiction where detectives interview witnesses and ask for detailed explanations of where they were at the time of murders, or ask for witnesses to offer context of their relationship to the murdered party. Detectives usually ask for these kind of recounts during interrogations, and Ren's sessions with Dr. Xu began to feel more like interrogations as the narrative moved forward.

He repeatedly questioned Ren, who was an orphan at the age of six, about her birth parents' convoluted past. He tries to force ideas into her mind regarding who her real birth parents were and what their intentions had been when they brought Ren to an orphanage. He tried to force Ren to believe that her birth parents' leaving was not for protection, as Ren perceives, but abandonment. He also wouldn't let Ren leave his office although she occasionally looked visibly uncomfortable during the sessions, as if she'd take an escape route if she could find one. Ren becomes trapped in his treatment as Dr. Xu prescribes to the idea that patients do not leave his practice until they are cured.

Dr. Xu also does his own sleuthing and investigating when he seeks out information about Ren from former doctors. The information or clues are then used to guide Ren's trances and poke holes in the Ren's statements about her past, her parents, and her ghost sight. Secrets become a big part of the narrative as Dr. Xu must dispel of the disinformation, uncover Ren's secrets in order to cure her—even if he must go to great lengths to do so. As Dr. Xu becomes erratic in trying to cure Ren and prove her wrong, as he holds her hostage in his practice, we begin to wonder who the real villain is, if our supposed Sherlock is more of a Moriarty (Sherlock's equally intelligent foe).

When Dr. Xu starts pulling Ren into trances, we begin to wonder who the real patient is as occasionally, Dr. Xu is brought into trances along with Ren. In one scene the characters are in the plane of reality in Dr. Xu's office then Ren tells Dr. Xu she sees a bridge and a body of water. Immediately following this statement, Dr. Xu realizes he is standing at the foot of a bridge, the wallpapered walls of his study exchanged for the cool and open, outdoor air and a bridge before a pond. His eyes dart around. He's startled and confused that he's been brought into a trance. He turns around, preparing to walk away from the water but instead turns to see an approaching Ren who pushes him off the bridge and into the water. At this point in the film, we begin to question who's playing which role—patient and therapist. We question who has full control of the hypnosis. There's a question of who is the real Sherlock and who is Moriarty as Ren and Dr. Xu go back and forth in their control of the trances—Dr. Xu having met his psychological match.

When Dr. Xu is roped into a trance, Ren pushes him into a body of water.

In fact, Ren and Dr. Xu are very similar characters, almost foils of one another. She's insistent and stubborn on the existence of her ghost sight similar to Dr. Xu's own arrogance of his hypnotherapy abilities. However, unlike the academic ethos that Dr. Xu possess, Ren holds a supernatural ethos.

There was so much suspense packed into this movie all which helped to build a mood of uncertainty and suspense. As a viewer you were constantly uncertain on who to trust these two characters mentally manipulate one another. Moments such as Ren's arrival to Dr. Xu's practice were unsettling and chilling in its portrayal, something not sitting just right as a viewer. This is particularly evident when Dr. Xu first approaches Ren. She's staring at a clock that's running minutes behind. Not only was this making the heavily suggestive in the clock—as Ren readjusts the clock, this chill only deepens with the ticking sound of the clock—the sound of time running out, someone's time being up. Thrills were also infused in Ren's recount of her ghostly experiences, the ghosts appearing for the occasional jump scare. When Dr. Xu and Ren begin their battles in their trances. Dr. Xu, especially, goes through thrilling psychological scenes as he's constantly submerged underwater, his own secrets revealed by Ren.

Delightfully enough, *The Great Hypnotist* was very intriguing with a plot and character construction that surprisingly pulls from popular mystery formulas. However instead of detectives looking for a solution to a problem—we have a psychiatrist. Plus the twist makes up for some of the slower moments in the movie. It's one of those twists or endings where you mentally go back and reevaluate everything previously seen only without the rose-colored glasses you had on before. And all while watching, you can't help but think about how Ren's abilities operate as a wider metaphor about human mind's inner demons or ghosts. Sometimes we allow bad experiences, memories, people, to mentally haunt us. Sometimes we can't forget and we especially can't forgive. And we realize that no one, not even the "Great" Hypnotist can escape from such hauntings.

<https://youtu.be/7E6A6nImmNA>

— Kayla Chambers, Art & Design Editor; Layout Editor

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