

The Rice Children

by

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FADE IN:

EXT. RICE FIELD - DAY - A LONG TIME AGO

The rain falls.

CHILDREN trudge along the flooded rice field grabbing a rice shoot from the basket on their back and planting it under the muddy water.

SONG, an eight year old boy, one of the smaller ones, loses his footing and falls on his back. His hand reaches up to the clouds as his head disappears below the opaque water. Soon his hand disappears as well.

Moments pass.

LING, a fourteen year old girl, plunges her hands into the brown water. She pulls the fallen child above the surface.

LING
Be more careful.

Song sputters and sobs. He holds her tightly, like a rope holds a mooring.

Ling looks around nervously. She spies WEI, a man in his early thirties who brandishes a bamboo staff. He is nearby but he has not noticed them.

She gently pats Song on his back and his sobbing slows.

WEI (O.S.)
Back to work!

A glance over her shoulder shows Wei heading toward them.

Ling pushes Song away. He stares at her with teary eyes, beckons to her with outstretched arms.

LING
We must work.

Song turns away, hurt. He angrily grabs a rice shoot from the basket on his back and thrusts it under the water.

Ling quickly wades back toward her spot but Wei is already upon her.

WEI
Back to work!

She raises her hands just in time to receive a smack of the Wei's staff on one of her wrists.

She holds her hurt wrist. Her eyes fill with clear water but she doesn't cry. Instead she stares defiantly at Wei, who doesn't budge.

WEI

Back to work.

She softens, then submissively nods. With her uninjured hand she pulls a shoot from the basket on her back and places it beneath the water. Wei approves.

Wei turns to see Song glaring at him. He aggressively brandishes his staff and Song quickly turns away. Wei smirks.

EXT. EDGE OF RICE FIELD - LATER

The children exit the flooded field under watchful eyes of Wei and the other GUARDS.

They gather into a group. Younger children run among them with buckets full of water to rinse the muck off of the rice-worker's legs.

EXT. ORPHANAGE - LATER

The guards lead the group of children to a large complex of thatched housing.

The children enter the door of a sizeable but ramshackle hut.

INT. ORPHANAGE HUT - LATER

Water drips from the roof making puddles in the large dirt-floored room.

The older children sit in a circle in the center of the room. Younger children serve a bowl of rice to each of the rice-workers. The hungry children devour their rations.

All except one, CHIN, an emaciated, battered, thirteen year old boy. He holds his bowl out to each server that passes him by. The servers ignore him.

Song sits near Ling.

SONG

Why is he not fed?

LING
He does not work.

SONG
Why does he not work?

LING
He cannot walk.

Ling indicates her leg.

Song glances at Chin and sees that Chin has a bandage around one knee and no leg below it. Full of questions, Song looks back at Ling.

LING
It was cut while he worked. It
could not be saved.

SONG
He looks weak.

LING
He does not eat.

Song stares at Chin. Chin holds his bowl out to him. Song looks away.

SONG
Will he starve?

LING
He can not be saved.

SONG
Because he does not work the rice?!

LING
Without rice we would all starve.

Song contemplates his bowl of rice, then he returns to eating it.

ORPHANAGE HUT - NIGHT

Through the darkness the rain sounds loudly on the roof.

The children lie haphazardly around the floor. Song squirms near Ling, he whispers.

SONG
Ling?

Ling stirs.

LING
What is it, Song?

SONG
Thank you for saving me today.

LING
You are most welcome. Be quiet now.
We must sleep.

SONG
I am afraid.

Ling turns toward Song.

LING
Fear keeps us alive.

Song cuddles up to Ling. Ling cuddles him back.

SONG
I miss my mother.

LING
Of course.

SONG
She is dead.

LING
Then she is no longer afraid.

Song lies on his back and contemplates, then

SONG
Do you miss your mother?

LING
I remember very little about her. I
have been here a long time.

SONG
What do you remember? Do you
remember her name?

LING
Yes -- And I remember the way she
smelled -- like Jasmine. And --

SONG
And?

LING

And I remember a beautiful Buddha --
carved of ivory -- it glowed like
mountain snow in the morning...

A pause.

SONG

Ling?

LING

Yes, Song.

SONG

Are you my new mother?

LING

I am not.

Ling turns away.

SONG

I would like you to be.

LING

Now I am one who is afraid.

SONG

You have nothing to fear. Your new
son will protect you.

LING

Or he will die trying.

SONG

Then he will no longer be afraid.

ORPHANAGE HUT - NIGHT

Diffuse light streams into any crack it can find. The cock
crows. The children stir and wake, all except for Chin.

The sound of a door unlocking then Wei enters. He loudly
knocks his staff against a wall.

The children stop where they stand.

WEI

Time for work!

The children hurriedly group near the door. All but Song.

Song crosses to the motionless body of Chin and shakes him. Chin does not respond.

Another shake but this time Wei's staff smacks Song across his fingers. Song stares up at Wei, a tear falls down his cheek.

WEI
Time for work.

SONG
He's --

Wei threatens Song with his staff.

WEI
You do not speak! Go!

Song runs to Ling who puts her arms protectively around him. She glares at Wei.

Wei cocks his head in interest. Ling lowers her head with shame.

Wei kneels next to Chin. He feels Chin's neck.

WEI
He did not eat because he did not
work the rice. And now the rice
will eat him.

The children are wide-eyed but Wei laughs.

EXT. RICE FIELD - DAY

Several older male children carry the corpse of Chin out into the flooded field. Other children carry stones. One child carries a bamboo pole with a strip of fabric tied to its end.

In the middle of the field the pallbearers lower Chin's body onto the water. Then one by one the stone-carriers place their burden on the body until it disappears below the cloudy surface.

The bamboo pole placed at the location of the body as a marker finishes the service.

Song watches from a distance. He scans the area noticing many bamboo poles sticking up from the water, each with a strip of fabric. This rice field is a graveyard.

Ling, busy at work, watches Song out the corner of her eye.

WEI (O.S.)
Back to work!

Song glares at Wei. Wei glares back.

A quick glance toward Ling who motions to the basket on her back and Song pulls out a rice shoot from his own. He thrusts the shoot into the muddy water.

INT. ORPHANAGE HUT - LATER

The children sit in a familiar circle on the floor. Some hold their bowls out waiting for their serve of rice. Others devour the contents of their bowl.

Song sits close to Ling and contemplates his.

SONG
Are we all food for rice?

LING
We are to be fed rice.

SONG
Until Wei starves us.

LING
Until we are no longer hungry.

SONG
I am not afraid of hunger.

LING
Then I will miss you.

The sound of a door unlocking and the children look up, then Wei enters. He motions toward Ling.

WEI
Ling. Come.

Ling seems nervous but she stands. Song holds her arm, he is perplexed. Wei readies his staff.

Ling pats Song's hand and he releases her arm. No one but Song watches when Wei pats Ling's behind as she bravely exits the room.

EXT. ORPHANAGE - CONTINUOUS

It drizzles. Wei leads Ling across a slippery muddy clearing and into a sturdy looking house.

INT. ORPHANAGE HOUSE

Luxury compared to the hut. LIU, an older nobly dressed male, appraises them as Wei drags an apprehensive looking Ling inside.

LIU
Mmmmm. Clean her up.

WEI
Yes, Master Liu.

Wei pulls Ling across the hall and into the

KITCHEN

A large tub filled with water sits on the floor.

WEI
Undress.

Confusion lines Ling's face.

LING
What will you do --

WEI
You will not speak! Wash!

Ling submits and reluctantly unbuttons her shirt. Wei watches with interest. As Ling opens her shirt, Wei ashamedly turns away.

BEDROOM - LATER

Opulently decorated, a dresser stands on one wall, a small carved ivory Buddha that seems to glow with a light of its own sits on top among the other clutter.

Ling is pushed into the room by Wei.

WEI
Lie on the bed.

Ling, looking scrubbed, dressed in clean white robes, seems full of questions. Then defeated, she nods submissively and heads toward the bed.

She touches the silky sheets as if she has never touched anything like them before. A guilty smile shows on her lips. Then full of questions again, she turns toward Wei.

WEI

On the bed!

Without a question, she climbs onto the bed and lies flat on her back.

WEI

Do not move.

Ling stares at the ceiling. Wei closes the door.

Ling's eyes fall toward the sound. Then they scan the rest of the room. They stop at the ivory Buddha that glows like mountain snow in the morning.

SERIES OF SHOTS

The ivory Buddha lies toppled on the ground. A woman's bloodied hand stretches out toward it.

Ling sits up in bed and gazes more intently at the Buddha on the dresser.

A woman's body, bruised, beaten, bloody, her outstretched hand reaches toward the toppled Buddha and it begins to glow. Her fingers spasm, then stop.

Ling crawls toward the foot of the bed. The Buddha's glow intensifies.

A man stands next to the dead woman's body. He wipes his bloodied staff on his tunic.

The transparent image of the dead woman's face floats before the Buddha. Ling gasps, her hand reaches out toward the dresser.

LING

Mother?

A toddler, BABY LING, crawls up to the toppled Buddha and grabs it.

The man steps over the corpse of LING'S MOTHER and lifts the toddler from the floor, the glowing Buddha still in its hands. YOUNGER WEI smiles at the toddler he holds in his arms.

Anger twists Ling's face. She looks at the transparent face of her mother floating before the Buddha.

LING
Wei murdered you?

Wei stands outside the bedroom door. He screws his face trying to locate the muffled sound. Then he puts his ear to the door.

The transparent face speaks.

LING'S MOTHER
There is limited time. Listen carefully. You are to become a woman tonight. It is your destiny.

Wei's places his hand firmly against the sliding door.

Ling listens to her dead mother.

LING'S MOTHER
It is not how I would have it happen. I can no longer prevent it but I can guide you through the night, perhaps longer but that I cannot guarantee. Here is what you must do.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

OUTSIDE BEDROOM

Wei begins to slide the bedroom door open but a hand on his back startles him. He turns, brandishing his staff, ready to rumble.

Liu raises his hands for protection. Realizing his mistake, Wei lowers his staff and bows his head. Liu lowers his hands.

WEI
My apologies, Master.

LIU
A guard dog would give his apologies for barking?

Wei ponders this.

LIU
Is the girl ready?

WEI
Yes, Master Liu. As you asked.

LIU
Good. You will go far, Wei. I feel
much closer to you this evening.

Liu laughs. Wei is thoughtful.

LIU
Stand aside.

Wei nods and moves away from the door.

BEDROOM

Liu enters. Ling lies back on the bed, a peaceful smile on her face. She stares toward the ceiling.

Liu unbuttons his robe as he crosses toward the bed.

LIU
Do not be afraid.

Ling turns her head toward him.

LING
I am not afraid.

Liu looks disappointed.

LIU
You have done this before?

LING
You will be my first.

Liu smiles and his robe drops to the floor.

LIU
So brave a girl in the face of the
unknown.

He climbs on top of her and hikes up her robe.

LIU
I will be gentle.

He makes a sudden thrust. Ling grits her teeth and grimaces, tears well in her eyes, she looks toward the ceiling.

Lui continues to thrust, pumping more slowly now. He stares at Ling's face.

LIU
Mmmmmm. You are a beautiful girl.

LING
I am told I take after my mother.

LIU
She was a beautiful woman.

LING
You knew of her?

LIU
On occasion.

LING
She would like to speak with you?

Liu stops.

LIU
Speak?

LING
She is watching us.

Liu is thoughtful.

LIU
Mmmmmmm yes, Our ancestors watch over us, guide us.

Liu pumps again.

LIU
But at times like these I prefer to think they turn a blind eye.

LING'S MOTHER (O.S.)
And I prefer to think of myself as a hawk.

Liu stops and stares at Ling who gazes upward with a peaceful smile.

LIU
Perhaps it is best if we don't
speak.

LING'S MOTHER (O.S.)
The time for silence has ended.

Liu is alarmed. He follows Ling's gaze upwards until he flops over to her side.

Floating on the ceiling above him is the ghost of Ling's mother. Liu is horrified.

LING'S MOTHER
How nice to see you again, Master
Liu.

She reaches out her transparent hand in greeting.

OUTSIDE BEDROOM

Wei is bored, leaning on his staff, when he is startled by a man's scream. He quickly slides open the bedroom door.

BEDROOM

Wei enters and stares wide eyed at the scene before him.

Ling snatches the ivory Buddha from the dresser and darts past him.

Liu lay on the bed, clutching his chest, breathing quickly. A cloud of smoke above him dissipates.

Wei crosses to Liu. Liu leans back, he raises his arm and points his finger toward the ceiling. A last gasp of air

LIU
Mmmmmmm...

Then Liu relaxes, his arm drops to the bed and he stops breathing. Wei turns toward the door, rage on his face.

WEI
Ling!

He runs out of the door.

ENTRY HALL

Ling darts through the entry hall and out of the front door. ONLOOKERS stand around and seem too confused to take any action.

EXT. ORPHANAGE - NIGHT

It is raining heavily. Ling runs from the house and slips in the mud. She slides across the ground.

INT. ORPHANAGE HOUSE

Wei runs through the entry hall. The confused onlookers seem even more perplexed.

WEI
Where did she go?

The onlookers don't respond. Wei runs up to one of the onlookers.

WEI
Which way?!

The onlooker flinches.

EXT. ORPHANAGE

Ling pulls herself up from the mud and trudges through it toward the hut. She moves around the side of the building.

She trembles and breathes heavily. She finds a crack in the wall and whispers loudly through it.

LING
Song?

INT. ORPHANAGE HOUSE

The trembling onlooker points toward the door. Wei bolts toward it.

INT. ORPHANAGE HUT

Song stirs.

LING (O.S.)

Song?

Song runs his hand along the empty spot next to him where Ling should be. Then he bolts upright.

SONG

Ling?

EXT. ORPHANAGE

Ling runs around the back of the hut. She slips and slides in the muck.

NEAR THE HOUSE

Wei exits the front door, sure-footed.

WEI

Ling!

He scans the area. A flash of white at the edge of the hut, he runs toward it.

INT. ORPHANAGE HUT

Song runs to the hut's door and rattles it. It doesn't open.

SONG

Ling!

The other children stir.

EXT. ORPHANAGE

Ling runs through the heavy rain.

WEI (O.S.)

Ling!

She glances toward the glowing ivory Buddha in her hand.

LING

Mother. Help me!

An apparition of Ling's mother appears in the distance. Ling hurries toward her.

EXT. ORPHANAGE

Wei runs past the hut, then slows and squints. There are two white blurs in the distance. He is confused.

INT. ORPHANAGE HUT

Song rattles the door. The other children murmur. Song turns toward them.

SONG

Help me open the door!

CHILDREN

You can not help. -- We must sleep.
-- Quiet please.

EXT. EDGE OF RICE FIELD

Ling meets her mother's spirit at the edge of the flooded rice field.

LING

Where should I go?

LING'S MOTHER

Into the rice field.

LING

And after that?

LING'S MOTHER

I do not know. I am sorry. It is your destiny, not mine, and you must solely discover it.

LING

You said you would guide me.

LING'S MOTHER

And I have -- but my time here has ended. I must leave.

LING

Please, no! I have just found you.

LING'S MOTHER

I am weak.

LING
I have so much to ask.

Mother flickers.

LING'S MOTHER
You must go now. Meet your destiny
-- meet it without fear.

The Ivory Buddha stops glowing and the rain stops.

Ling lowers her head and does not see Wei blink his eyes in perplexity as the cloud of smoke that was Mother dissipates.

WEI
Ling?

Ling, suddenly aware of Wei, bolts off into the rice field. With quick reflexes Wei follows.

INT. ORPHANAGE HUT

Song throws his measly weight against the door.

SONG
Ling! I will protect you.

Then again.

SONG
Ling!

Then again. Then in despair he slides to the ground, sobbing.

SONG
I will protect you.

EXT. RICE FIELD

Ling wades through the flooded field. She is followed closely by Wei.

WEI
Ling. Stop right there.

LING
I will not stop. Ever. You murdered
my mother!

Wei angrily thwacks at the water near her with his staff.

WEI

That is not your concern.

LING

She was my mother.

WEI

She was an evil woman.

LING

She was everything good.

WEI

And you are just like her.

Ling slips and falls into the muddy water. Wei reaches his hands beneath the surface and pulls her out.

Ling struggles and sputters. With one hand Wei holds Ling up to his face.

LING

So now you will murder me as well.

WEI

You give me no choice. You murdered my master. It is my duty.

Ling spits at him. Wei drops her into the water and she tries to squirm away but he quickly catches her and holds her down.

Her head beneath the water, her arms raise above it to pull at his. Then he lifts her again.

WEI

You know nothing of duty. Just like your mother. Mei.

Ling scratches him.

LING

You dare say her name! Murderer!
Murder --

And beneath the water she goes. Her arms raise once again to pull at his. He turns his head away, his face screwed with disgust.

Her arms slowly fall back into the water and he raises her once again. She sputters then gasps for breath, much of the fight has left her.

WEI
She was my wife.

Ling's eyes go wide. Wei nods.

SERIES OF SHOTS

Baby Ling toddles about, and YOUNGER LIU watches on with a smile.

WEI (V.O.)
Master Liu took an interest in you
at an early age.

Ling's mother, MEI, snatches her from the floor and holds her protectively. She stares defiantly at Younger Liu.

Younger Liu smiles, then turns and puts his arm around the shoulder of Younger Wei.

WEI (V.O.)
I wanted only to increase our
station. Give you a better go at
life.

Younger Wei signs a paper and then shakes Younger Liu's hand.

WEI (V.O.)
You were promised to Liu on your
fourteenth birthday.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

A drop of water streams down Lings face Wei turns away.

WEI
Today.

SERIES OF SHOTS

Mei holds Baby Ling in her arms. She is arguing with Younger Wei.

WEI (V.O.)
Your mother would have none of it.
She threatened to take you away.

Mei's bags are open and partially full. She grabs a small carved ivory Buddha from the top of a crate.

Wei's staff comes down hard and knocks Mei to the ground. The ivory Buddha tumbles from her hand.

WEI (V.O.)
I could not let that happen.

Wei hits Mei with his staff. Then again. Then again. Baby Ling watches.

END SERIES OF SHOTS

Wei is trying not to cry.

WEI
I have tried to raise you to stay
in line. To know your duty. I can
see now that I've failed.

LING
Father?

Wei stares at Ling, a look of guilt on his face.

LING
I am not afraid.

Wei nods his understanding. Then he pushes Ling below the waters surface. She goes down without a struggle. Bubbles mar the surface, then they stop.

Wei shouts his anguish to the sky.

Then he hangs his head as he wades back toward the orphanage.

But behind him a light shines beneath the muddy water. Then the glowing ivory Buddha breaks the surface.

Unaware, Wei trudges forward.

LING (O.S.)
Father?

Wei's eyes go wide and he turns toward the sound. The ghost of Ling floats above glowing Buddha, above the water. Wei trembles as he backs through the water.

WEI
This cannot be. You are dead.

LING
Do not be afraid.

Wei stand firm.

WEI

I am not afraid. I have done my
duty but now, I suppose, you must
do yours.

LING

I have not come to harm you.

Wei relaxes.

LING

I have come to warn you.

Wei cocks his head. A loud moan from the side catches Wei's
attention.

LING

They come.

He turns to see the spirt of Chin rising from the water near
his bamboo grave marker. Wei trembles.

LING

I tried to stop them. I explained
you were just doing your duty, but
they do not forgive as easily as I.

Around the rice field spirts rise from their watery graves.
They glide across the water toward Wei. Wei looks to Ling.

WEI

Help me.

LING

Goodbye Father. We will not meet
again.

His lip trembles as Ling fades. The other spirits moan as
they rush toward him.

Wei turns and runs toward the shore.

EXT. ORPHANAGE

A distant but piercing male scream echoes around the
compound.

INT. ORPHANAGE HUT - DAY

The opening hut door bangs into Song and wakes him. He quickly becomes alert. He scans the room.

SONG

Ling?

A GUARD enters. The children murmur. Song tugs at the guard's shirt.

SONG

Where's Ling?

The guard smacks him away and into a wall.

GUARD

Time for work!

The children quickly group around the guard.

EXT. RICE FIELD

Song pulls a shoot from the basket on his back and sadly lowers it into the water.

LING (O.S.)

Song.

He looks up but no one is there. He scans the area. Nearby he sees a brilliant white object floating in the water.

He wades over to it and pulls it from its muddy surroundings. He turns it over in his hands. The intricately carved ivory Buddha seems to glow like mountain snow in the morning.

Song smiles.

FADE OUT.