On television, joblessness is a real tear-jerker
BY GEORGE WEHRFRITZ AND LIJIA MACLEOD

Chinese (Soap) Opera

THE NEW CHINESE SOAP OPERA begins with that least romantic of moments: a layoff. In the first of 15 episodes of the Shanghai Film Studio's "Women Who Have Gone Through Winter," the middle-aged lead, Azheng, loses her job when a Shanghai textile mill sheds most of its employees. Then she loses her husband, who runs off with his young mistress. But our heroine, a former model worker, is not defeated. After false starts in a Taiwanese sweatshop and selling snacks at a street market, Azheng bands together with former colleagues and builds a business, hand-knitting sweaters for export. Her cheating husband, meanwhile, squanders his money and dies of cancer, leaving Azheng to her new love, a handsome opera singer. "The drama," says lead actress Pan Hong, "tells people that winter is the hardest time, but that it will pass."

Call it cinema of the unemployed. The new Chinese melodramas weave tales of romantic and filial love into uplifting career advice for hard times. Films and TV shows urge workers to prepare for "temporary hardship" as the government discards the "iron rice bowl" of guaranteed jobs in state-run factories. These plots are a sharp twist on China's black-and-white propaganda classics, which were filled with work brigades heroically pulling together to build bridges, tap oilfields and reclaim wasteland for farms. Rather than glorify the masses, today's happy endings celebrate diligent individuals who bounce back from layoffs to find success in the new market economy.

Shanghai's desperate textile industry is the favorite backdrop. "Long Years, Long Road," a Shanghai Television mini-series, follows laid-off garment workers as they open a restaurant, a kindergarten and a toy factory. The moral: "As long as you change your concept of employment, you'll find many things you can do," says director Dou Qi. The China Central Television serial "Deep Affection Among Sisters" portrays a laid-off Communist Party member in Shanghai, Jing Ke, who passes employment offers on to her fellow textile workers. In the end, Jing alone remains out of work, a martyr to the cause of job hunters.

The same themes of selflessness and survival are onstage in "Worker's Family" by the Qingdao Drama Theater in Beijing. The family has been working in a textile mill for two generations; Grandma, now 70 and retired, refuses cancer treatment to lighten the troubled mill's insurance burden. The mill goes bust anyway, and Grandma's eldest daughter, a single mother with a disabled child, loses her job. Once again the denouement is bittersweet: Grandma dies, but the daughter starts a successful house-cleaning service and ultimately returns to manage the old mill after a Japanese investor revitalizes it. "I can imagine myself in the same situation," says a teary-eyed machine-tools worker in the Beijing audience. "The only difference is that I won't have the same good outcome."

She's not the only one who finds the new endings too sweet to believe. By the government's own forecast, half of China's 74 million state workers will lose their jobs within three years. In a June interview, President Jiang Zemin told NEWSWEEK that roughly 12 million had already been cut from state payrolls. They get less than $20 a month in survival pay and, these days, little sympathy from government officials. "Many workers are too used to the privilege of being 'masters of the nation'," says Xia Jizhi, a Ministry of Labor official. But political commentator and author Wang Shan argues that the new dramas hardly help anxious workers by downplaying the hard times ahead. "Encourage the spirit to strive," he says, "but tell people that the situation will get worse before it gets better, and that a large percentage of laid-off workers will remain unemployed."

KATHARINA HESSE

No sugarcoating: 'The Red Suit' depicts Beijing as vast and dehumanizing

"The Red Suit" is the only production that doesn't whitewash the turmoil of unemployment. Director Li Shaohong's powerful story begins on Liu Shijie's birthday, when the dusty combine factory where he works is shut down to make way for Beijing's biggest shopping mall. Humiliated, Liu hides the layoff from his wife, who is a meatpacker, and their teenage daughter. For two months he pedals his black one-speed bicycle aimlessly through scenes that make Beijing look vast and dehumanizing, as it would in the eyes of a man ripped from a cocoon of cradle-to-grave security. When a former colleague visits the family's run-down house, Liu's lie is revealed. His wife is momentarily shattered, not by the layoff but because he kept it a secret.

Yet Liu perseveres. An employment agency rejects him because he can't type; a mop-wielding woman at Kentucky Fried Chicken dissuades him from a career in fast food, barking, "We don't hire men." Then he tells his family he's landed an "important job" at Beijing's Sheraton Hotel, where he's become a lavatory attendant. That lasts until he dunks an insulting guest's head in a toilet. Months later his wife visits the hotel but can't find him. On her way home, she spots a red suit jacket she'd bought for his birthday hanging beneath a flyover. Below it, sitting on a low stool, her husband repairs a bicycle. Credits roll as he stands before her, proud state worker reduced to roadside fix-it man. For Chinese audiences, a tragic ending, and a realistic reminder that the faces on the screen could be theirs. ■

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