

Sydney Film Festival

***Blind Shaft* director speaks about filmmaking in China**

Part 2

John Chan
18 July 2003

One of the more impressive contemporary works screened at this year's festival was *Blind Shaft*, a first-time feature written and directed by 34-year-old Chinese director Li Yang. The film has won awards at the Berlin, Buenos Aires and Hong Kong international film festivals.

Previously reviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site* (See: Buenos Aires 5th International Festival of Independent Cinema—The two paths), the film examines the lives of two itinerant coal miners in northern China. The men have been so brutalised by the all-pervasive poverty and conditions in the mining industry that they earn money by organising fatal accidents to kill individual workmates, whom they claim are relatives. The two men are paid compensation and hush money by the mine owners over the deaths. They move on to the next coal mine.

No film has so graphically exposed the dangerous and de-humanising character of coal mining in China, an industry that claims the lives of thousands each year in gas explosions, roof collapses and mine floods. According to official figures, over 3,300 miners were killed in the first six months of 2002. Unofficial estimates claim that up to 7,000 are killed per year in fatal accidents.

Not surprisingly, Yang's film has been banned by the Beijing government whose policies are responsible for the horrendous conditions in Chinese mines. While Li Yang says he is "not political", *Blind Shaft* constitutes a powerful indictment of the Stalinist regime. He spoke with the WSWs in Sydney after a screening his film.

John Chan: First, let me say that I was very impressed by your film. There are so few movies from China and internationally that deal with the social conditions confronting ordinary people. Your film is based on Liu Qingbang's novel *Shen Mu*. Why did you choose this book?

Li Yang: I wanted to make a film about China and read many novels and other material. I chose Liu Qingbang's novel, though, because it moved me deeply. His stories about the lives of modern grassroots Chinese are very good. I'd returned to China after being away for more than a decade and had other feelings about the western world or what we called capitalism and how it compared to China's developing market economy. I also had certain concerns about the high rate of economic growth and the situation facing ordinary people. Perhaps all these things shocked me.

JC: Could you explain more about the novel? Is it popular in China?

LY: The novel won the Laoshe Literature Prize in 2002, which is one of the highest literature awards in China for a medium-sized novel. Although a work of fiction it is based on a true story. Liu Qingbang has deep insights into life and is very familiar with the issues facing ordinary people. Precisely because he deals with real living figures, it moved me deeply.

JC: Your film has been banned, but why didn't the government crack

down on the novel?

LY: It is quite unusual in China. Certain aspects of Chinese politics are strange and many things don't follow homogenous standards. It is defined as "One Country, Two Systems" but it really is "one country with several systems". Every department seems to have its own rules and it often happens that things that can be reported on television cannot be created as dramas, and some things that can be turned into dramas cannot be made into films. Music and painting are given more free expression.

I don't actually understand how it works, but I can say that the Chinese Film Bureau is one of the most conservative of the artistic institutions. They probably heavily restrict films because they think movies can become a means of propaganda, instead of entertainment and artistic expression.

JC: Your film shows the dangerous situation facing coal miners. Were you shocked by these conditions?

LY: Yes, I was shocked. But the conditions shown in my movie are not bad compared to other mines. There are much worse ones than this.

The focus of my film, however, was not simply to show the brutal situation in which the miners live, but to express the struggle, conflicts and contradictions in their lives. I wanted to portray how human nature degenerates under the attraction of money, and the good side of humanity in this transitional period—how good confronts evil.

This is an internal process. As you saw in the film one of the miners didn't want to kill the young boy but was trying to earn money for his own family. As his fellow workmate said: "If you don't kill him, your kids will be like him and have to work." This was a difficult choice.

Another thing that shocked me was that the miners seemed to be comfortable with the conditions in which they worked. Perhaps they, like many Chinese, were optimistic and hoped that things would get better in the future. They weren't insensitive to their own hardship, but without these jobs they had nothing. Their optimism about life is something I didn't expect. So in the film you also see them enjoying life—joking in the shower, playing cards and drinking.

JC: Do you think the Chinese government banned your film because it revealed these harsh conditions?

LY: Yes, probably, but my film isn't just about one theme. It deals with modern lives, the worship of money and several other issues. So I don't know exactly why they targeted it specifically.

JC: At last night's screening you said that the mine used in the film belonged to a friend.

LY: My friend's friend. But I knew the owners well.

JC: Could you explain the conditions?

LY: There are many deadly small mines in China, but they are not all

illegal, many of them have legal documents and procedures. Through the bribery of local officials, the mine owners can get official approval for their operations, even though the safety measures are far below standard. I wanted to show that there are many money-power deals and that's why the mine owners are afraid to report any deadly accidents. If the accidents are brought to light then it means that it is not just one person's responsibility.

JC: Where did you shoot your films?

LY: In Hebei, Shanxi and Henan [provinces].

JC: There is another element of the movie concerning prostitutes. Could you elaborate on this?

LY: This is part of real life for these people. The two miners kill in order to earn money and use some of this for enjoyment. Their peasant conception of enjoyment, however, is somewhat limited and they are satisfied with the cheap prostitutes in the local towns. I didn't want to exaggerate anything, it was simply part of their lives.

JC: You include one scene showing the prostitutes at the post office sending money back home.

LY: That's right. These are ordinary people trying to earn a living and support their families.

JC: At the question and answer session after the screening last night someone suggested that your story was fake?

LY: This comment is not unusual. I lived outside China for many years and understand the psychology of overseas Chinese who have been away for too long and are not familiar with contemporary conditions. They might also think that the film was made to blacken China's image. The country is transforming but their ideas remain fixed to the time when they left.

I've returned to China several times over the years and my knowledge is closer to reality. I can say that all the details and pictures in my movie are fully real and that you can find this sort of situation everywhere in China.

JC: There is a scene in the movie where the two miners go to a karaoke bar and at one point sing a song, "Long Live Socialism" with two prostitutes. Could you comment on this?

LY: The song has no particular significance, it simply represents another aspect of life for these miners. They were given a communist education and sang this song because it was the only one they knew. They couldn't sing Deng Lijun [Taiwanese pop singer in 1970s and 80s]. The script depended not on my will, but on the need to accurately represent the thinking and behavior of these characters.

JC: What are conditions like for filmmakers in China?

LY: China's market reform has changed the [state-owned] studios and they no longer function as before. In the past, films could only be made by these studios. Today any company can make movies. So the market system has made it more open and the studios have lost their dictatorial authority.

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This is a good thing. But in China there are political as well as economic pressures. Filmmakers have to earn money while at the same time they cannot make anything that will irritate the government—otherwise they face heavy fines. These conditions mean that Chinese filmmakers must be very self-disciplined.

JC: In the 1980s Zhang Yimao and other Fifth Generation filmmakers made movies that conflicted with the government. Their latest films seem more conservative. Could you comment on this?

LY: They must have their own reasons for these films and their current attitudes. It was normal that the Fifth Generation filmmakers, and even some commercial movies, came into conflict with the government at that time. Every artist develops their own individual style and while I have my own methods I hope there will be many filmmaking styles develop in China, not just the sort of movie I have made. If this occurs, there will be

a wide market for films.

JC: What impact will the government ban of *Blind Shaft* have on your career? Did you realise what would happen before you began?

LY: Yes, I'd thought about it. I could have made some kind of compromise and made a film within the system, or made something that only half satisfied my artistic conscience. At this moment, however, I believe that what I did is correct. I didn't curse or shame this or that regime or political party but simply revealed some aspects of real life. Time and history will test out this film.

Although the film has been banned, the situation is better than I expected. At least I'm still allowed to return to China occasionally, my life hasn't been physically threatened and, at least for now, I'm free from jail. Maybe this is an expression of the Chinese government's openness and enlightenment. The situation is new to me, but I hope that it becomes more open and allows more freedom. Of course, it can't be achieved in one day in such a vast country, so we will have to wait patiently.

JC: I read that you were away from China for 14 years. Did you leave after the Tiananmen Square protests in 1989? What do you think about these events?

LY: I left China in 1987 and only learnt about the June 4th protests through the foreign media. I've made no special study about these events, but only heard one-sided reports or various stories from some people, and still have no real idea of what took place. The development of this sort of student movement was inevitable and has pushed forward some policy changes.

JC: How did this impact on filmmakers?

LY: I don't think there was any direct impact on filmmakers but it did provide a thinking space on everything. This was the good side of it I think. That's my basic approach.

JC: But the Chinese government imposed even greater restrictions on freedom of expression in response to the 1989 protests.

LY: I don't know about this because I'm not involved in politics. Whether the government becomes more liberal or more authoritarian I'm not sure. From my personal point of view, I don't feel that it has become more authoritarian. On the contrary, I believe they thought through these things and have learnt how to handle this type of event in a better manner.

So I don't think there is less freedom. There are many jokes circulating around the Internet about some Chinese government leaders, and I talked about politics when I was in China and no one was arrested. At least my life wasn't threatened when I made this film. Of course, I knew that they were going to trouble me, but it isn't like the past. If you had made a documentary film about China at that time you would have been accused of being a spy and expelled from the country. From my personal point of view, there seems to be far greater freedom.

JC: I can't agree with you on this. Since you first left China, a huge social gap has developed between the rich and poor. Did you notice this and do you have any comment?

LY: This isn't just a Chinese problem but is common wherever there is rapid economic development, such as in Taiwan, Germany and the US. These issues were shown in the American films of the 1940s. In fact, it is a common problem of all humanity. Man's desire for money and other attractions is boundless and this is how he loses his humanity.

My film is set in China but the story could have occurred in Germany, the US or in Australia. I made it in China simply because I am Chinese and familiar with the country. The basic theme is universal. It was equally brutal in the early days of Australia when the Aborigines were expelled to remote areas. I think there was a recent film on this chapter of history. So I think it is a common issue of humanity. Man must face this reality and discover how to eliminate these kinds of painful experiences.

JC: One last question. What's your next project?

LY: I have many ideas but filmmaking is expensive work and so it depends on what my investors favour. Up to now I haven't decided.



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