

San Francisco International Film Festival 2006—Part 2

Creditable works

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This is the second part of a series of articles on the 2006 San Francisco International Film Festival, held April 20-May 4. The first part was posted May 13.

A number of Chinese films in recent years made by youthful writers and directors reveal some of the same overall strengths: a seriousness about and sympathy for ordinary people's difficulties, a critical attitude toward the vast economic and social processes under way in China, and determined attention to aesthetic detail. Moreover, in many cases, the young filmmakers have shown an ingenious and energetic willingness to circumvent the official channels to obtain the necessary images. On a world scale, it must be said, these works often stand out against the general self-indulgence and trivializing.

The Chinese art films frequently share some of the same limitations as well, above all a social and historical amorphousness. For example, while the harshness of the present circumstances is repeatedly exposed, the social essence of the transformation is not considered, nor is its evolution (except in its external features). The films of Jia Zhang-ke (*Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *The World*) perhaps come closest to elaborating a social history of the past two decades, but even here the process is viewed largely through the prism of changes in lifestyle and individual outlook.

Despite its undoubted appeal, Jia's body of work strikes one as a series of almost interchangeable tableaux (carefully and elegantly done tableaux!), like wax figures, because conscious attention to the inner driving forces of the historical process—including the transformed character of the society's upper echelons—is missing. A sense of the *objectively driven* character of the changes would provide greater coherence and vitality to the human drama, but that element is almost entirely absent in Chinese filmmaking. The ideological confusion that exists there is hardly the fault of the film-writers and directors, but it remains a barrier.

The present convulsive situation in China is presented for the most part in the form of intensely created miniatures, details from a larger picture that is never shown. Any effort to grasp the social whole is avoided. And this results in a certain artistic-dramatic weakening, in the final analysis, a diminution of effect. Many similar motifs and situations recur, without apparent progress or deepening of the artists' understanding. One almost feels that each young filmmaker begins over again from the same starting-point.

While the brutality of the new capitalists, large and small, and the corruption and indifference of officials are treated from time to time, we rarely glimpse more than the general contours of these social layers. This is no doubt a politically sensitive issue, as it would touch upon the process of social polarization and the enrichment of certain strata, in many cases, associated with the Chinese "Communist" Party. Nonetheless, we would like to see a fictional version, for example, of the blue jean factory owner in the documentary *China Blue*, about whom I wrote in 2005:

"The employer is a former peasant, turned police chief, turned small

capitalist. His backward wife prays endlessly. This is a picture of nascent Chinese capitalism, the 'New Era.' Mr. Lam, the owner, praises [Chinese Stalinist leader] Deng Xiaoping, who gave opportunities to 'farm-boys like me.' He dismisses his workers as 'uneducated, low-caliber' employees without a work ethic."

The 'Mr. Lams' never or rarely make an appearance in feature filmmaking, or if they do, only in the distance, with the details of their lives and social ascendancy omitted.

Taking Father Home, from young Chinese director Ying Liang (born 1977 in Shanghai), is another serious, appealing, and limited, work. Seventeen-year-old Xu Yun, contrary to his mother's wishes, leaves his village to search for his father, absent six years and now supposedly wealthy in the big city. She warns him that the entire village is about to be relocated, and he will not be able to find his family again if he goes now.

Xu Yun is determined, angry. He sets off, with no money in his pocket, only a basket with two ducks on his back. His younger sister runs after him, "Take me with you!" When he rejects that idea, she yells after him, "Come back by all means!"

On a bus going to the city, he meets a shady character, 'Scar,' who denounces a pickpocket and returns a woman's wallet—for a reward. He advises the youth to adopt his own attitude toward life, "The more aggressive the better." They get off the bus together. The kid is looking for the Happiness Hotel, his father's last-known residence. The older man, at first, is harsh: "A real man doesn't ask for help." Eventually he assists Xu Yun in obtaining a room for the night, except it belongs to someone else. A fracas ensues.

Kicked out of a local police station at night, harassed by a gang on motorbikes, Xu Yun ends up in the company of a middle-aged policeman, who insists that he return home to his village. Xu Yun, who wants to continue his search, runs away twice, but the cop finds him both times. Finally, in the face of Xu Yun's determination, the cop gives way and tries to help. The Happiness Hotel, they learn, has been torn down. (The names of the locations in the film are wonderful, that is, appalling: Happiness Hotel, Freedom Avenue, Liberation Bridge.)

They hear about a "Boss Xu," the name Xu Yun's father goes by, but it turns out to be a female "Boss." The father, it turns out, has moved away. They go to his former apartment, but have no luck there either. The policeman gets hurt in an accident, and hospitalized. All bandaged up, he still tells Xu Yun, "Go back home, stop looking." Meanwhile television news reports warn of an impending flood, the city is being evacuated.

By accident, Xu Yun encounters his father, who has a new wife and young daughter. But he is not wealthy any longer, if he ever was. The wife tells the teenager, "Your father is a good man. He has no money." The father refuses to return to his first family. Xu Yun takes desperate measures.

Newsreel footage shows the flooded city; the television reports congratulate the authorities on the evacuation. In the final scene, Xu Yun catches a pickpocket on board a bus and returns a stolen item, for a price.

He has adopted Scar's motto, "The more aggressive the better."

Taking Father Home gives an indication of the harshness of everyday life, of social relations, in the 'new China,' and their impact on a sensitive adolescent. The picture is not a pretty one—rural poverty, urban violence and general social dysfunction for wide layers of the population. Economic boom for a few means displacement and dislocation for masses of others. The past is being washed away—we see a flooded temple and a head bobbing in the swollen river—but what sort of future is being offered to people?

The film was made outside official channels for little money, reportedly on a borrowed video camera, in Sichuan province in southwestern China. The performers are non-professionals, friends and family.

In his first feature film, Ying displays the same slightly cool and objective approach as many of his youthful Chinese counterparts. The action takes place, for the most part, in the middle distance. Xu Yun appears only twice in close-up, in the opening shot and toward the end of the film. The filmmaker obviously cares about the personal and social situation, but he wants to avoid manipulating his audience, pulling at their heart-strings.

Nonetheless, the distanced style runs the risk of becoming a bit of a cliché. It seems too comfortable a fit for a certain group of Chinese and east Asian filmmakers: the deliberate pace of the action, the unmoving camera, the elliptical or disjointed narrative. In *Taking Father Home* the suggestion of the arbitrariness and haphazard quality of life, including a darkly comical element, does not entirely jibe with the violent denouement, which feels contrived.

The young filmmakers in China may be fearful of slipping into didacticism or heavy-handed social commentary. After all, the Maoist-Stalinist school of art, crude and nationalist-populist, only collapsed a few decades ago. Nonetheless, the artists must find some means of combining the utmost sensitivity to the intimate moments in life with a greater attention to the general shape and direction of the society. The latter, in the proper artistic hands, can only strengthen the former.

The director has said that the film's point of view is Xu Yun's, which is also his. "I think the story is about growing up, seeking, missing, faith, development, calamity and revival," he explains.

Ying Liang has every right to his artistic choices, and limited resources no doubt played a part, but one cannot help harboring the suspicion that he has avoided some of the more complicated problems. Xu Yun's perspective is limited. While his travels are intriguing, and sometimes revealing, their odd twists and turns are almost built into the situation. One sees things during a trip to new places, the world is strange, the old patterns are disrupted. But what about those patterns, and the regularity of life for those whose faces one sees only fleetingly, in passing? Isn't that a more substantial question? To a certain extent, Xu Yun's situation at home in his village and his father's life in the city (his rise and fall), the two potentially richest and most complex elements in the drama, are never treated.

They Chose China (directed by Shui-Bo Wang, who now lives in Canada) is a fascinating little film, about the group of 21 US soldiers, prisoners of war, who decided to remain in China after the end of the Korean War. Extraordinary archival footage shows US prisoners in Chinese captivity. Many of them died, although not apparently through deliberate mistreatment, but of hunger and cold. The Chinese revolutionaries, fresh from defeating Chiang Kai-shek's forces, delivered political lectures to the captives, and some of the material found a hearing.

In January 1954, at the conclusion of the conflict, the American POWs were free to return home. Those who rejected repatriation were taken to a neutral zone and given 90 days to reconsider their decision. Twenty-one US soldiers decided to remain in China. Interviewed at the time, the soldiers give a variety of answers, generally denouncing McCarthyism and the militaristic clique running the US government.

No doubt in many cases a continuity existed between previous beliefs or experiences and this sympathy for the Chinese revolution. We don't learn too much about that. One soldier recounts his difficulty in finding a job in the US, hence his enlistment in the army. David Hawkins, one of the few surviving members of the group, explains how he signed up at the age of 16, and became disillusioned with the American military and government. A black serviceman from Memphis, Clarence Adams, recounts his run-ins with racism and white supremacists (the interview was conducted some time ago—Adams is now dead). When the police came for him, he ran away and joined the military.

Some of the former POWs attended the People's University in Beijing, learned Chinese, studied the Chinese Stalinist version of Marxism and the history of the Chinese Communist Party and the Soviet Union. They were clearly inspired, in the first days, by the revolutionary determination of the Chinese. They attended May Day celebrations in Beijing in 1954. Adams eventually recorded speeches addressed to black American soldiers in Vietnam.

Hawkins returned to the US in 1957. He explains that the mood had changed, perhaps in the direction of increased nationalism, and that the suppression of the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, supported by Beijing, had had an impact on him. In a fascinating appearance he made on US television after his return, Hawkins stood his ground while CBS's Mike Wallace repeatedly referred to him as a 'turncoat.'

Most of the others eventually drifted back to the US. Some found life in China too harsh, particularly those who chose to work on state farms in rural areas. Adams, whose widow and daughter appear in the documentary, also felt the atmosphere in China had altered, for the worse. He explains that he had gone from being called 'Comrade,' to 'Citizen,' and finally to 'Mr.,' and he knew it was time to leave. Adams and his Chinese wife opened a Chinese restaurant in Memphis, and despite some initial hostility, made a life for themselves there.

Only one US serviceman, James Veneris, remained in China until his death a few years ago. The documentary contains footage of Veneris' appearance on Chinese television, as an older man, explaining his decision to stay. During the Cultural Revolution, Veneris came under attack from the Red Guards, but his comrades at work defended him.

One of the film's most moving and astonishing moments comes when Hawkins returns to China, to the city of Wuhan, and encounters men he worked with in a factory in the 1950s. They remember him well. He also visits Veneris' grave and pays tribute to his former comrade. Hawkins makes a favorable impression on the spectator.

This is one of those slight films, at 52 minutes, that opens a window onto a fascinating, little-known and contradictory reality.

In *Lili and the Baobab* (directed by Chantal Richard), a 33-year-old photographer from Normandy travels to a village in Senegal to document projects financed by her local government, the African town's sister community. Lili (Romane Bohringer), unmarried and childless, is something of a curiosity in the Senegalese village. She feels a bit lonely, but her photography keeps her in touch with things. She does more than take pictures of the infrastructure, she befriends people, and enters their lives a little.

In particular, she develops a friendship with an unmarried woman, Aminata (Aminata Zaaria), who works as a servant. Someone explains: Aminata comes from a poor family, she has no husband. Many African men have gone to other countries to work, so there are now many single women.

Back in Normandy, Lili attempts to resume her old life, but she feels unsettled. She visits Moussa, from the village, in a workers' hostel. Here are the African men forced to emigrate, factory workers living in cramped quarters. Lili learns that Aminata, still unmarried, has had a child. Her father may send her away in disgrace. Lili organizes a campaign in Aminata's defense.

Lili returns to the village herself. She bonds with Aminata's baby. The African woman makes a startling proposal, which she sees as the only way her child will have a chance for "success and happiness." Lili does some soul-searching, and makes a proposal of her own. They come to an understanding. The final shot, of the two women walking down the road, with the baby, is genuinely moving.

This is Richard's first feature film, and it is a creditable, intelligent effort. The filmmaker has previously made documentaries, including *Un jour, je repartirai* (*One day, I will leave again*), about Algerian and Moroccan immigrants who came to France in the postwar period to find work, and their subsequent fate, and *Luis et Margot*, about two elderly people who meet and fall in love, over meals in a café.

Lili and the Baobab remains with the viewer, because of the obvious care with which it was made. The film treats its characters with sympathy and respect. These are small things perhaps, but not so small in today's cinema. The filmmaker touches with sensitivity and thought on problems of colonialism, the status of women and the conditions of immigrants in France (the glimpse we get of the workers' hostel is valuable, and rare).

Richard's strength lies in her calm and humane approach to problems. At a certain point perhaps the film's quietness might be confused with passivity, the performer's reserve with quasi-timidity. One can appreciate the desire to distinguish oneself from both the bombast of the commercial film world and the self-conscious, socially indifferent (often cold and noisy) posturing of so much French filmmaking at present, but the answer does not lie merely in speaking and acting in an undertone, so to speak. People who care about the world also need to be bold and presumptuous, in their own way.

To be continued



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