Vancouver International Film Festival 2007—Part 1

The “new seriousness” in cinema...

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This is the first in a series of articles on the recent Vancouver International Film Festival (September 27-October 12)

The Vancouver film festival presented some 240 feature films this year, among them numerous interesting and provocative works. Some of the strongest of those came from China and other parts of East Asia.

A film like *Little Moth* (directed by Peng Tao) is a sharp-eyed picture of Chinese society and the cruelty inevitably inflicted on its weakest members. *Bing Ai* (Feng Yan), a documentary, gives some indication of the extent of social antagonisms in China and the outrage felt (and openly expressed) by wide layers of the population.

Global politics intruded into festival organizers’ efforts to showcase Chinese independent filmmaking. In an unprecedented action, Canadian authorities denied visas to five of six Chinese directors invited to participate at the festival’s “Dragon and Tigers” Asian film series. Two of the directors reapplied successfully to the Canadian embassy in Beijing, according to the *Vancouver Sun*, while “three decided not to bother.”

One of the filmmakers who reapplied and was accepted, Zhang Yuedong (*Mid-Afternoon Bark*), showed a *Sun* reporter the humiliating and insulting letter he received from an immigration officer, rejecting his visa based on Section A11 (1) of the Immigration and Refugee Protection Act.

“I am not satisfied that you are sufficiently well-established and/or have sufficient ties in your country of residence to motivate your departure from Canada at the end of your authorized period of stay,” the officer wrote, adding: “Should you wish to [re]apply, I would suggest that you do so only if your situation has changed substantively or you have significant new information to submit.”

In an e-mail to a film festival official, Zhu Rikun, producer of *Timber Gang* (a documentary about a work crew cutting trees in harsh wintertime conditions), quite legitimately asked, “As a person who received an invitation from you, I’d like to ask, do only rich people have the right to attend film festivals?” *Timber Gang*’s director, Yu Guangyi, wrote, “I am very grateful for the invitation. But knowing the conditions required for the visa, I doubt that anyone will pass.”

Bing Ai director Feng Yan commented in an email, “If people with no property want to attend a film festival, do they always have to be forced to submit a non-existing ‘bank statement,’ forced to lie and lose credit?”

One can only interpret the rejection of the Chinese filmmakers’ visas as an effort by the Conservative government in Ottawa to align itself ever more closely with the belligerent and reckless foreign policy of the Bush administration.

The responses of the Chinese filmmakers to the Canadian government action indicate a sensitivity to social issues that is rare in global cinema. The directors live and work in a country undergoing a massive social transformation. Millions have rapidly fallen victim to capitalist predators. A new class of vulgar and thuggish entrepreneurs, often making use of the slogans of the Chinese “Communist” Party, has arisen. For the mass of people, reality is harsh almost beyond measure. The harshness of everyday life tends to fill these works.

“Money, money. You only think about money,” Guihua tells her husband, Luo, at one point in Peng Tao’s *Little Moth*. It’s too late by then, and the comment makes no impression, in any event.

In the film’s opening sequence, Luo pays a visit to his uncle, in some rural backwater. Over noodles, they get down to business. Luo’s uncle tells him, “I found a girl for you. She’s 11 years old. She can’t walk. Her father’s too poor to take her to a hospital.”

Luo buys the girl, Xiao Ezi (“Little Moth”), for 1,000 yuan (US$135) from her father, unemployed and a drunkard. The little girl has a blood disease; Luo plans to use her, an object of pity, to beg on the street.

Guihua develops feelings for the little girl. When she attempts to boil Chinese herbs prescribed by a doctor, Luo prevents her, saying, “I bought her to make money, not to cure a patient.”

The begging effort begins. Luo stands around and watches while Guihua and the little girl sit silently by a sheet stretched out on the sidewalk that reads “Help my child” and explains her condition. Although initially lucrative, the begging operation runs into difficulties. Luo has invaded the “territory” of a gang of local lowlifes. They want a share of the profits in return for protection.

The three move to another locale. Again, someone sets Luo straight on the “rules” in this new territory. Yang, as he calls himself, claims to be a friend of Luo’s uncle. His own meal ticket, a one-armed boy, is out begging. The boy, 13, proposes to Xiao Ezi that they run away: he’ll carry her on his back and he will beg to support them, while they look for his “birth father.” Distraught, Guihua goes in search of the girl: “I pity her. How can she make a living?”

There are more unhappy twists and turns. “Yang” turns out to be a truly sinister figure, a vendor of body organs, with designs on Guihua. A wealthy woman interests herself in Xiao Ezi, until a doctor offers a chilling diagnosis and proposes an expensive operation. In the end, Guihua puts up posters around the city, “Two children lost.”

The director, Peng Tao, explains, “I wanted to show the unique status of people living at the bottom of the Chinese social ladder.” His film goes a long way toward doing that, intelligently and sensitively.

There are various possible approaches to this sort of painful material. In Europe and North America at present, on the rare occasion that filmmakers treat society’s “lower depths,” more often than not they sensationalize, become hysterical. The poor are as familiar to those filmmakers as creatures from another planet.

The approach taken in *Little Moth* has definite limitations, about which we will speak later, but Peng proceeds cautiously and seriously. Dialogue is at a minimum here, even at the most critical junctures. Indeed, this is *life* at a minimum, from exhaustion, lack of resources, lack of culture. Small gestures, indirect comments say a great deal.

Everything is grey and shabby and grim, the buildings, the muddy or paved streets, the clothes, the unfortunate people themselves. Is there a single joyful or relaxed moment in the film? Whether such an approach

captures life in all its aspects may be a problem, but the sincerity of the film can't be called into question.

Terrible poverty and terrible social backwardness, not the individuals' wickedness, drive the events. In fact, Guihua, an accomplice in the begging scheme, proves to be warm-hearted, and even Luo, capable of the most callous comments ("She'll lose us 1,000 yuan if she dies," he says, in front of the little girl), becomes quite inconsolable when he learns that his wife may be in danger. On the other hand, Xiao Ezi's wealthy would-be benefactress plays the cruelest trick of all. The director has his head screwed on the right way.

Bing Ai is a remarkable and illuminating portrait of a Chinese peasant woman. Zhang Bing Ai, her sickly husband and two children grow oranges by the Yangtze River. The family lives in an area that will be flooded as part of the gigantic Three Gorges Dam Project. They are ordered to relocate, but Bing Ai rejects the compensation offered by the government and digs her heels in.

There are many fascinating aspects to this film, made over the course of nearly a decade by independent filmmaker Feng Yan. There are elements we expect to see: the peasant's unending, backbreaking labor, his or her thrift, the primitivism of rural Chinese life. But the unanticipated moments are what makes the film genuinely interesting.

Obviously, the filmmaker has dedicated herself to the subject. Not everyone spends 8 or 10 years on such a project. Presumably, a bond developed between the director and her subject. Bing Ai speaks quite articulately about a range of subjects, including quite intimate ones.

She didn't know her husband when they married and had no feelings for him. "His mother didn't like me." The night before her wedding, she slaved away in the kitchen until 2 a.m. "Our affection grew over the years." Still, in an early scene, Bing Ai complains bitterly about his ill health and their resulting difficulties. "The only reason I didn't kill myself was because of the children."

She speaks about her numerous abortions. I would have had the children, even if I'd had to go hungry, Bing Ai explains, but the law prevented it. She also had miscarriages "because I worked too hard." Nowadays in the cities, she says, women have people attending them when they have children, "like servants waiting on their master," but adds, "Nobody cared when we had our kids."

Bing Ai tells the camera that city folk, including the new "self-made men," are more clever than she, but "most of them make money by illegal means." She wouldn't want her daughter to make "dirty money."

The most revealing moments concern Bing Ai's struggle with the authorities. Certain species of filmmaker, including the hysterical and socially demoralized, self-servingly imagine that the population is largely submissive, practically inviting the blows that rain down upon it.

Nothing could be further from the truth. The absence as of yet of a mass movement against capitalism speaks above all to the rottenness of all the traditional organizations through which social protest once found expression and the population's sense that the authorities are impervious to their concerns. But submission, resignation?—that is a serious misreading of the present situation.

The film reveals the anger of the residents of Bing Ai's village against the miserable compensation offered them. At a June 2002 meeting with government officials, the villagers protest against the unfairness of the evacuation process. One says: "We aren't getting anything out of the migration policy. The policy of access to water, roads and electricity and land. We haven't got any of it. We have to carry the water in a container from right over the mountain. In the past, we never had to do that." They're confused, they don't know how or whom to fight, but the crowd seethes with resentment.

Bing Ai is a thorn in the side of the officials, because she refuses the compensation and refuses to move. "I am stubborn," she says with pride. In one of the most revealing scenes, she tells a visiting group of bureaucrats, "Party officials got compensation. The land you gave me permission to build on has no electricity, no water." She wants a permit to build at a site closer to her farmland. "If I was a village official, you would have given me a permit long ago. If I was the village head, the village party secretary or an official, you'd definitely give me permission. If I had money, you'd give in." One replies: "Now you're accusing us of being corrupt." If the shoe fits...

On another occasion, another group of officials accompanies Bing Ai and her husband to the proposed location of her new home. The couple is not satisfied at all—the land is on a slope and far from the river. An official tells the crew to stop filming (which they do momentarily, but then continue surreptitiously). He threatens: "You better decide what you want.... I've told you before, when the time comes, you'll relocate, like it or not. We'll arrange for some men to move you here.... You'll build here, that's it.... I've been polite long enough." The party secretary tells Bing Ai, "The government won't abandon you."

She sees through the whole pack of thieves. "I'll survive, just wait and see. They won't come to a good end.... Just think how much money they make. Their pockets are full of other people's money. It's not fair...they don't have a conscience." She tells the filmmaker, "I'll die with a good reputation, that's good enough for me." A final title notes that her house was eventually submerged under the flooding waters, and that with her 4,800 yuan in compensation (US$640) "she bought a shed by the road where she still lives." This is a detailed and unusual portrait of a complex human being and a complex social situation.

It is necessary to praise the better films being made and encourage their makers, but at the same time criticize their limitations, which are palpable. The critic Aleksandr Voronsky noted that "Every epoch, every period of social development, every class, group or layer has its own difficulties and obstacles on the way to artistic truth and, it goes without saying, its own favorable circumstances."

What are some of our difficulties and obstacles? Film depends on life and on the state of life. It has been and remains as a total process (production, distribution, exhibition), one of the least "portable" of art forms. It relies on the cooperation and interaction of human beings on a large scale, in essence, on a global scale. A period of reaction and stagnation such as we've lived through over the past three decades, in which the best human types are discouraged and draw back and the worst come forward aggressively, is not favorable for art and culture in general. But perhaps for a musician or a singer, even a painter, the change in social mood is not so decisive, as he or she tends to be less directly dependent on the current state of social relations.

The wretched trajectory of filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard might help illustrate the point. In 1965, he observed, "The cinema is optimistic because everything is always possible, nothing is ever prohibited; all you need is to be in touch with life." Forty years later, he sighed to an interviewer, "It's over. There was a time maybe when cinema could have improved society, but that time was missed." It's difficult to imagine anyone working in another art form drawing such drastic (and, of course, utterly wrongheaded) conclusions about his or her medium as a whole. Would a composer or an architect be quite as likely to make the same sort of remark?

Godard notwithstanding, filmmaking as a whole is pulling out of the alternately cynical and socially indifferent or "playful" (Postmodernist) moods of the 1990s and early 2000s. There is a new seriousness that continues to make itself felt. This was evident at both the Toronto and Vancouver film festivals. Changes in global economic and political conditions, the outbreak of neo-colonial wars and the emergence of staggering levels of social inequality have had an impact, as they must.

The "new seriousness," however, is not without its problems and limitations. A considerable gap exists between the generation now beginning to grapple with the world in images and that which produced

remarkable works in the postwar period.

Ingmar Bergman and Michelangelo Antonioni died this year, but they were essentially inactive for years. Robert Altman died last year, Robert Bresson in 1999, Akira Kurosawa in 1998, Federico Fellini in 1993, Satyajit Ray in 1992, John Huston and Douglas Sirk in 1987, Orson Welles in 1985, François Truffaut in 1984, Luis Buñuel and Robert Aldrich in 1983, Rainer Werner Fassbinder in 1982, Alfred Hitchcock and Raoul Walsh in 1980, Nicholas Ray in 1979, Roberto Rossellini and Howard Hawks in 1977, Luchino Visconti in 1976, Pier Paolo Pasolini in 1975 and John Ford in 1973. Anthony Mann died in 1967, Yasujiro Ozu in 1963 and Kenji Mizoguchi in 1956. Godard is alive, but artistically more or less a corpse.

We'll continue this discussion in the next article.

To be continued