

An interview with Li Yifan, director of *The Longwang Chronicles*

David Walsh
20 October 2008

We spoke to Chinese filmmaker Li Yifan, through a translator, in Vancouver on October 1.

David Walsh: The conditions of rural life you present in *The Longwang Chronicles* are quite harsh, quite brutal. Are they typical of China's countryside?



Li Yifan in Vancouver

Li Yifan: I hope through my film that the world can know and understand the vast expanse of rural China. People there live on a different time scheme, which has been going on for thousands of years.

I wouldn't say the conditions are entirely typical, China-wide. What you see is true of southwest China. China is a huge country; the southwest and the northeast, for example, are very different, economically, geographically. Reality in much of China is harsh, primitive. Especially in the southwest.

In that part of the country arable land is limited. The average farmer has one *mu*, or one-sixth of an acre. No machinery can be used; it wouldn't be cost-effective for the small farmer, and they couldn't afford it anyway.

In south China each person has one *mu*, in northern China, two *mu*, but in the south the farmer gets two crops a year, so it equals out.

All land is officially state-owned, although there are plans to move to private ownership.

DW: Why did you begin your film with a quote from Karl Marx? ["They cannot represent themselves, they

must be represented." -- *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852]

LY: I think what Marx wrote in general makes perfect sense. When Chinese society opted out of communism, I don't think that choice was a good thing. The idea of social equality is still a good thing. In terms of social inequality, it's the worst time in China.

For example, there's a law that states that if a person from the city is killed in a traffic accident, the compensation is totally different, higher, than if the victim comes from the countryside.

I'm currently running a legal program, which involves 8,000 cases of laborers who left the villages. I've met many people injured on construction sites. There are many injuries among these farmer/laborers. Arms cut off, severed in accidents. I've seen compensation awards of only 20,000 RMB [\$2,900] for an arm.

The worst cases are the miners, suffering from black lung, asbestosis and other illnesses. It's difficult to get any compensation. In one famous case, when the settlement finally came, so many years had passed that most of the victims had died.

DW: I was surprised by the presence of the Christian or pseudo-Christian sects in the film. Is this a recent development?

LY: Well, not that recent. It started in the 1980s. In the last couple of years, Christianity has spread very widely.

DW: We would ascribe that, as we do in the US, to the combination of economic desperation and the discrediting of the official ideology, in China's case, this fraudulent "Marxism-Leninism." When the government abandons you, in fact, every organization abandons you, you may want Jesus on your side. Would that be an accurate assessment?

LY: Yes. From the common farmer to Hu Jintao, no

one believes in "communism" any more.

DW: In recent years, the US and China have become dependent on one another, with the US forming a vast market for Chinese goods and relying on vast inflows of Chinese capital. What would be the impact of a prolonged slump in the US, as we now see unfolding?

LY: I've been very concerned about this issue. What price have the Chinese people paid for "modernization"? What have we sacrificed in terms of social equality, justice?

Previously, I've been focusing on the impact on the individual. The cost to the individual, what he has given up. Now, with the US financial crisis, we have to think of the overall effects of that on the Chinese economy. What the Chinese people will pay is gigantic, enormous. If this period of prolonged inequality persists, there will be an explosion, a great many upheavals.

Riots, various social incidents, are more and more frequent. Incidents all over China, lots of violent ones. Also anti-social acts. Like the case where someone killed six policemen.

We have people living in a society ruled by a mafia, an underground society. We have people being clubbed on the head in broad daylight. There are incidents, protests, on the scale of 20,000-30,000 a year.

DW: What is the filmmaker's responsibility?

LY: I don't think the perspective of revolution in China is realistic now, as it once was. All any individual, filmmaker or not, can do, is play a small role. I think of myself as a pathologist. I can analyze what's wrong. I collect information, I present the problems, but I can't cure the disease.



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