

An interview with Ying Liang, director of Good Cats

David Walsh
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We reviewed Chinese director Ying Liang's Good Cats in the first part of the series of articles on the recent Vancouver film festival. The title is an ironic reference to the aphorism attributed to former Chinese Stalinist leader Deng Xiaoping, justifying the open adoption of the free market: "It doesn't matter if it is a black cat or a white cat. As long as it can catch mice, it's a good cat."

The film follows Luo Liang, a young man who works as a driver for "Boss Peng," owner of a real estate company in Zigong, a city in southwestern China's Sichuan Province. Meanwhile the young man's mentor, Liu Xiaopei, is slowly falling apart. So is Luo's marriage, as his wife and his more affluent in-laws think he should be more ambitious and 'get ahead' more rapidly. The film is sharp-eyed, amusing and disturbing.

Ying Liang (born 1977, in Shanghai) has now made three interesting films, including the earlier Taking Father Home and The Other Half. We conducted an interview via email.



Good Cats

David Walsh: Can you explain your attitude toward Deng Xiaoping's aphorism about the cats?

Ying Liang: I'm against it, just as I'm against the slogan "One World, One Dream" [the slogan of the

2008 Beijing Olympics].

It's very strange! These days the French claim they are a Socialist country whereas our "red" China doesn't even have the courage to face up to the facts. In the post-Mao era, the highest religion in our society and age is to get rich by whatever means possible! A sad and frightening scene has taken place on this land. Moreover, it's been going on for the past 30 years.

DW: Are you criticizing the central character [Luo Liang, the driver] for his passivity, his silence, his acceptance of the situation? But what are his economic choices? Is the situation his fault?

YL: He's a young man from the rural area, and he hasn't had much education. People like that usually end up in one of three situations. They either become Boss Peng, Liu Xiaopei or a parasite like Luo Liang.

I have many friends who are only too happy to be parasites. I didn't want to spend too much time criticizing them. At most I was upset with them for not fighting hard enough. What happened to them was not their fault. Their personalities led them to their choices, which is nothing surprising.

DW: Does Boss Peng go insane out of guilt, or something else? Do you have sympathy for him?

YL: There can be many interpretations as to the reason why he goes insane. "One Film, Many Interpretations!" That's the interesting and positive way.

In a world full of deformities, anyone can go insane. Naturally I have experienced similar things. I've also had guilty feelings, caused by a sense of powerlessness and despair which assaulted me every day. Of course though, what I went through was somewhat different from what Boss Peng goes through.

DW: You have made three very different films. All of them portray difficult social and personal conditions,

but each has elements of comedy and each is lively. This is unusual. Do you think that films should look directly at life in all its aspects?

YL: Thank you for your lasting interest in all my three films!

Yes, film as art and a social instrument must honestly confront life. Films which audiences can sit through without thinking are not films; they are commercial products.

DW: What is the situation today for young Chinese filmmakers? Are your films shown in China?



Director Ying Liang

YL:

Independent documentary filmmakers in China have reached a very high level of artistic achievement. Independent feature filmmaking isn't doing as well. But I believe it has a bright future.

With further innovations in shooting and editing equipment and a constant fall in production costs, a brand new generation of filmmakers will emerge very soon.

It's true my films can't be shown in Chinese theaters, but they've been screened many times at independent film festivals, universities and in bars.

A DVD version of *Taking Father Home* was allowed to see the light of day (because regulations on DVD releases weren't very strict then). Immediately there were pirated copies. It was also uploaded onto the web for people to watch for free. I'm very pleased about those developments! We have not been able to release *The Other Half* and *Good Cats* on DVD because regulations suddenly got strict. I may upload the two films onto the web so people can watch them for free.

DW: There is a growing economic crisis. What will be the impact for the Chinese population, in your opinion?

YL: I am not sure. What can be observed directly

right now is that property prices have fallen greatly, so have stock prices. Some companies have had to shut down. The Chinese will also feel that the end of the world is coming, although many people can't figure out why that is so or what the future has in store for them. I'm one of those people.

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