

69th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 8

Increasing pressures on Chinese filmmakers

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This is the eighth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival, the Berlinale, held from February 7 to 17, 2019. The first part was posted on February 15, the second on February 22, the third on February 28, the fourth on March 5, the fifth on March 11, the sixth on March 13 and the seventh on March 16.

While Chinese filmmakers have long had to walk a tightrope to ensure their films make it through the country's repressive censorship regime, recent decisions indicate this process is becoming even more difficult. Last year, the ruling bureaucracy in Beijing tightened up its control over China's entertainment industry by shifting responsibility for film culture from the State Council to the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Department.

At a symposium of the Chinese film industry held at the end of February, the deputy minister of the propaganda department and recently appointed chief of the Film Bureau, Wang Xiaohui, set a target of 100 Chinese films per year. The films should deal with "realistic topics," and, according to Wang (a 30-year propaganda department veteran), should centre on "the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" and have "patriotic plots." He followed up this sinister philistinism with a clear and stern warning: filmmakers "must have a clear ideological bottom line and cannot challenge the political system."

It appears that one of the first victims of this new policy was the prominent Chinese film director Zhang Yimou, whose entry for the main Berlinale competition section, *One Second*, was withdrawn from the programme at the last moment. A second feature, *Better Days*, directed by Derek Kwok-cheung Tsang, was also withdrawn. According to Berlinale publicity, the latter film is about "the social and political forces tugging at two young individuals in today's China."

Chinese authorities claim both films were pulled for "technical reasons." In fact, it is far more likely both films fell afoul of Beijing's propaganda ministry.

According to media reports, the principal character in *One Second* is a man fleeing a work camp at the end of the so-called Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). In addition, Zhang's film is set in Xinjiang, where Uyghur Muslims reside. In recent years, the US has sought to foster Uyghur separatism as part of its campaign to intimidate and isolate China. Both the Cultural Revolution and Uyghur separatism are contentious issues for the Beijing bureaucracy.

The Cultural Revolution was launched by Chinese Communist Party (CCP) chairman Mao Zedong in 1966 to combat his factional rivals inside the party. Following the disastrous failure of Mao's "Great Leap Forward," which led to mass famine and a huge economic crisis,

sections of the state bureaucracy headed by Liu Shaoqi and Deng Xiaoping agitated for the implementation of capitalist-type "market reforms."

To regain the initiative, Mao and his faction initiated the Cultural Revolution, claiming they were defending socialism against the "capitalist roaders." Mao, however, had no answer to the country's economic crisis, and, when workers sought to take matters into their own hands, the bureaucracy—terrified at the prospect of a genuine popular uprising—rapidly buried its internal differences and turned to the army to suppress the working class.

Eventually, in 1971, Mao came to a rapprochement with American imperialism, laying the diplomatic foundations for Deng Xiaoping to inaugurate his "market reforms" and open the country to foreign capital in 1979.

The entire period from 1966 to the final re-establishment of capitalist market relations in 1978 remains a red rag for the CCP leadership, which continues to have a highly ambivalent attitude towards the Cultural Revolution. Exposures of the repressive character of the Cultural Revolution are endorsed by those sections of the apparatus and middle class that suffered during this time, including those that have enriched themselves in the past four decades, and at the same time used to justify the regime's current capitalist policies.

Zhang (born 1950) is one of China's most prominent and prolific directors (belonging to the so-called Fifth Generation of filmmakers), and has made more than 20 features, including a number of notable works such as *Red Sorghum* (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992) and *Not One Less* (1999).

As a young man, the director was himself subject to "re-education" during the Cultural Revolution, and in 1994 his film *To Live* was banned in China. Zhang appeared to have made peace with the bureaucracy with his martial arts spectacular *Hero* (2002), which would have certainly fulfilled the criteria of the country's current propaganda department. One of his most recent films, *Coming Home*, did adopt a critical stance toward the Cultural Revolution.

Zhang's rehabilitation seemed secured when he was awarded the job of choreographing the opening and closing ceremonies at the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. However, he fell out of favour once more with the authorities and was fined over \$1 million in 2015 for violating China's one-child policy. In the event, the recent Berlin film festival lamely showed Zhang's *Hero* (out of competition) instead of his scheduled film. No further information has been forthcoming.

Two other Chinese films at this year's festival also indicated in their own way the potential pitfalls confronting Chinese filmmakers.

Director Lou Ye's *The Shadow Play* begins in sensational fashion. The film opens with the discovery of a corpse on the banks of the

Pearl River by a young couple. We then jump forward seven years to 2013 and the demolition of an entire neighbourhood in the centre of the city of Guangzhou. We witness fierce clashes between the police protecting the head of the property company carrying out the demolition and residents of the neighbourhood seeking to defend their homes. In the midst of the riots, the director of the municipal building commission, Tang Yijie, falls to his death from the roof of a building.

The scenes of rioting in *The Shadow Play* closely recall the frequent clashes between riot police and migrant workers in a series of southern Chinese cities during the past decade. Much of Guangzhou's old city has been razed to the ground to make way for the skyscrapers that dominate the new financial centre.

Lou's film continues to draw the viewer's attention by exploring the links between the urban planner and a corrupt local real estate magnate. The discovery of a nexus of relations between city officials, property speculators and local politicians is made by a young policeman, Yang Jiadong, who is intent on getting to the truth. In order to close down the investigation, Jiadong is set up by his foes and forced to retreat to Hong Kong, where he continues his campaign for justice.

Having begun promisingly, *The Shadow Play* rapidly degenerates into a sensationalist thriller. Director Lou has close links to the Hong Kong film industry, and it shows. Later in the film, we witness the types of excessive violence, fight scenes and absurd twists of plot that characterise so many contemporary Hong Kong movies.

Upon reflection, it is possible to understand why the Chinese authorities permitted such a film. In recent years, the Chinese bureaucracy, headed by state president Xi Jinping, has made much of the party leadership's intent to root out corruption. Xi's campaign is primarily aimed at neutralising factions inside the party that could threaten his own position, while strengthening the state apparatus to deal with an increasingly militant working class.

The Shadow Play lifts the lid on corruption in Chinese society, but instils the hope it can be combated from the inside, for example, by a policeman enthused with a sense of justice. As for the working class, it remains on the outside looking in, capable of causing a ruckus, but not much else.

So Long, My Son

A much more satisfying and humane approach to recent Chinese history is taken by the film *So Long, My Son* directed by Wang Xiaoshuai (*So Close to Paradise*, *Beijing Bicycle*, *Drifters*—all reviewed by the WSWs). The three-hour film relates a family saga stretching from the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution to the present day—a period in which tens of millions of peasants and poor workers poured into China's cities in a period of rapid social and political transformation.

With terrific central performances from its main actors Wang Jingchun, playing Liu Yaojun who repairs boats, and Yong Mei, as his wife, the film centres on the problems encountered by a young family in connection with China's One Child policy.

The policy introduced in 1979 limited most families to a single offspring (see Zhang Yimou above). Without giving away too much of the plot, the tragic, accidental death of their only child has tremendous, long-lasting repercussions for the boat repairer's family.

He and his wife adopt a child in order to make up for their loss, but the pain of their biological child's death lingers, and life is also not easy for their adopted son, destined to fill the shoes of someone he never knew.

The film encompasses the period of the so-called Four Modernisations initiated by Premier Deng Xiaoping. In one notable scene, we witness the angry response of factory workers, including Liu's wife, who have been told they are to be made redundant. Liu's wife has already given everything to the factory, including undergoing an abortion ordered by her boss to keep her job.

In contrast to *The Shadow Play*, Wang Xiaoshuai's film is devoid of any type of sensationalism. We witness the tragic death of the son from a distance. Far more telling than explicit scenes of the boy's death are the scenes of his parents' torment. The film exudes a profound sense of warmth and empathy for its characters who retain their resilience and capacity for humour until the very end.

Last year, the CCP overturned its One Child policy to stimulate its domestic market and now permits families to have two children if they choose. On this basis, it appears it was possible for *So Long, My Son*, with its critique of the former policy, to slip through the censor's net.

So Long, My Son indicates that, despite the repressive policies of the Chinese bureaucracy, it is still possible for valuable cinematic works to reach an international public. At the same time, it is clear that against a background of growing domestic and international tensions, the balancing act for Chinese filmmakers is becoming more and more challenging.

To be continued

The author also recommends:

Coming Home: A small, sincere film about big, complex times
[20 October 2015]

Zhang Yimou's *The Great Wall*: Issues bound up with a major Chinese film production
[23 February 2017]



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