

Ascension: Social division and social ambition in China

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Filmed in 2019 before the onset of the pandemic, *Ascension* is a documentary by Chinese-American director Jessica Kingdon about social divisions and social climbing in contemporary China.

Shot in 51 locations across the country, the movie—according to the production notes—is “observational and essayistic,” “impressionistic,” examining, among other things, the “juxtaposition of wealth and poverty” and the “often coercive relationships between the various levels of capitalist enterprise.”

The film had its world premiere at New York’s Tribeca Film Festival in June, where it won Best Documentary Feature. It has recently been released in the US by MTV Documentary Films.

“My aim in *Ascension*,” continues Kingdon, “is to draw the viewer’s attention to the universal aspects of industrial creation and consumption, and pose questions about who benefits from industrial enterprise. In any nation, the benefits are rarely apparent at the bottom of the chain.”

The filmmaker explains that she did not mean to single out China as the exemplar of “capitalist indignity.” Rather, she uses this “factory of the world” to “illustrate the daily realities of industrial systems, both in one nation and around the world.”

The movie’s title is drawn from a poem by the filmmaker’s great-grandfather written in 1912, just after the fall of the Qing empire.

Ascension’s official description reads in part: “The film ascends through the levels of the capitalist structure: workers running factory production, the middle class selling to aspirational consumers, and the elites reveling in a new level of hedonistic enjoyment.” In traveling up the rungs of China’s social ladder, the filmmakers show that the contemporary “Chinese

Dream” ... “remains an elusive fantasy for most.”

This 97-minute snapshot of China is divided into three sections. The first is the strongest and most revealing. Recruiters for large foreign companies, shouting over loudspeakers like carnival barkers, attempt to entice the jobless: “Rides free to the factory ... dorm and food provided ... no health test required—20 yuan [\$3.10 per hour] ... dorms four people per room (no more than eight!) ... includes air conditioning ... It’s for the new Huawei phone ... Earn 220 yuan [a day] at Foxconn ... no criminal record ... no tattoos allowed ... be as non-tattooed as possible”

The camera takes in billboards, with such messages as “Work hard, and all wishes come true.”

In Kingdon’s film, we see a number of different sections of the multimillion-strong Chinese working class, from miners digging up rare earths for powering batteries to employees in a fish processing facility, from workers in bottled water factories to those in plants making sex dolls and Ralph Lauren clothing.

The filmmaker took particular care to convey viscerally the sights and sounds of work. Kingdon comments: “We lav’d [placed a lavalier microphone on] people working in factories as much as we could in order to get first-person sound. One of my favorite sound moments is when the young woman on the water bottle assembly line pauses to take a sip from her portable thermos ... Then there is the moment of those ladies’ shoes pumping the pedals in the plastic bottle cap factory.”

The logic of the global economy finds ironic expression in the fact that the anti-Chinese fanatic Trump’s 2020 campaign had its “Keep America Great” merchandise produced in China, for obvious economic reasons!

According to Kingdon, the excesses of consumerism

demand “mostly useless objects as they move from the factory to the outside world, where they will live a short life before being turned into polluting waste.” Along these lines, she includes scenes from the New South China Mall in Dongguan and the New Century Global Center in Chengdu.

Middle-class ambition is the focus of the second segment. Hopefuls attend workshops and seminars, like Star Boss Entrepreneurial Camp, a two-day workshop where the motto is “Monetize Your Personal Brand.” At the end, the participants announce their goals. One young man jarringly proclaims: “After two days of training, I decided to work to death!”

“Let’s bring the pride of China’s 5,000-year history to show the world the prettiest smiles,” says one motivational speaker. Apparently, self-help gurus are everywhere! There is the International Butler Academy in Chengdu, where drinking glasses are designed to accommodate larger European noses, and the Genghis Security Academy in Beijing for bodyguard training.

The section on the wealthy towards the end of the film is the briefest. In an upscale restaurant, a group of young men and women boast that “China is a global player now.” A maid prepares a room in a super-posh hotel.

Nathan Truesdell’s cinematography elegantly suggests the vastness and variations of the country, accentuated by Dan Deacon’s score. In any event, imagery and sound must count for a good deal in the narration-less documentary.

It is significant that Kingdon pays no attention to the propaganda about “communist” China. She makes no bones about the fact that China is a highly developed capitalist country with a pronounced and growing social divide. However, she equally makes clear that her film is not “meant to be an indictment of that system,” rather it is merely an exploration of “the paradox of progress.”

The result is an intriguing work, but a passive one. Understanding present-day China would involve seriously and painstakingly examining where the society came from. The country underwent convulsive events in the 20th century, above all, the 1949 Revolution. How is it possible that a country ruled by a “Communist Party” has been transformed into the dog-eat-dog capitalist society that Kingdon portrays? A host of historical questions arise. The director’s instincts are

generally healthy, but they only take her so far.

“Impressionistically” gazing on a social phenomenon as complex as China produces some riveting material. However, unless the filmmaker is equipped with a store of historical and social knowledge, her probing camera may generate striking images, but the most profound truths will remain hidden.

Nonetheless, Kingdon’s documentary accomplishes some of its aims. She asserts: “The status anxiety and the alienation of modern capitalism which are apparent in the film are states of being which I found profoundly familiar from my life in the United States. These are ways of being that are increasingly the norm across cultures, and not just in China.”

“My hope,” she continues, “is that the familiarity of these anxieties will lead American viewers to question their own ideas about the differences and similarities between the two nations, and examine the unconscious biases they may hold about the superiority of their country.” This is not an insignificant objective, particularly given the anti-Chinese propaganda barrage centered in the US.



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