

# *The Ark and Great Happiness: Young Chinese filmmakers and social reality*

**Isabel Roy****22 August 2022**

*The films reviewed here were screened during the Chai Chinese Film Festival in Leipzig, Germany, May 25-28, 2022.*

Last month, the Chinese government declared that the world's second biggest economy had grown by only 0.4 percent between April and June. The unemployment rate for urban youth aged 16 to 24 was as high as 19.3 percent in June and has generally shown an upward trend since it began being recorded in 2018. A long-feared crisis in China's property market, which has played a crucial role since the global financial crisis of 2008 to maintain economic growth and social stability, was sparked off last year by the default of the property developer Evergrande.

The acute social inequality and ever-diminishing opportunities for the newer generations has led to a desire among young filmmakers to document and question present social conditions in China.

The CHAI Chinese film festival in Leipzig, Germany featured movies about the pandemic, existential struggles and their impact on romantic and family relationships. However, a lack of political and historical perspective remains a serious obstacle.

This was especially felt in *The Ark*, a 101-minute-long documentary about the death of the director Dan Wei's grandmother, Zhang Xiuhua, filmed at the beginning of 2020. It was his second work following the feature film *Warm House* (2018).

The movie opens with a black screen and Ms. Zhang's sounds of pain. No part of the dying process is left to the imagination. Throughout the movie the viewer bears witness to the contents of colostomy bags, the details of Ms. Zhang's surgery and an upsetting scene where she is screaming, disoriented and struggling to breathe.

Everything is shot in black and white and with a 1:1 ratio. There is no narration, the viewer is left to piece together the context of the family drama from the conversations taking place on screen, which can be confusing at times.

Although the documentary is very much focused on subjective suffering, we catch a glimpse of the wider societal context in which it takes place. Family members repeatedly discuss bribing the doctors to get better care. The one-child policy is mentioned, as well as the cost of raising children

nowadays, one male relative pronouncing "These children will kill you...getting a wife, buying an apartment..."

"Such a sick country." A female relative adds.

The eldest son of Zhang Xiuhua is struggling to pay for her treatment and resorts to calling acquaintances and ask them for loans. His wife and sister are embarrassed when they find out and chastise him for it. The money for his children's tuition is being eaten up to pay for his mother's complicated treatment. At one point he says to no one in particular "I might lose my job, the epidemic is still out of control, what do I do?"

The pandemic as such is barely present throughout the documentary. We see hospital staff cleaning up the corridors, news anchors talking about the novel virus on hospital televisions and a neighbourhood being quarantined.

Seeing Ms. Zhang's family tending to her every need lovingly and supporting each other through their grief is touching, especially in light of the inhuman policies of global governments that have normalized the death of the elderly in relation to the COVID pandemic.

Critics have called Dan's movie "personal" and underlined its emotionally gripping nature. Dan said he hoped to reflect a Chinese family's dilemma and mental state and creating a connection during the times of the pandemic.

But there comes a point where continuously shaking up the viewer emotionally to create connection backfires and leaves him frustrated and numb. How can we really relate or gain anything from a work that throws suffering at us with barely any context? Was this movie really made for something other than the director processing his emotions?

At the end, we are left with an overwhelming sense of depression and hopelessness and ask ourselves, "Well, how did it come to this?" Dan offers only references to the Bible and Noah's Ark in particular. The message seems to be that the only hope to escape the world's sufferings lies in the afterlife.

## ***The Great Happiness***

On the other hand, *The Great Happiness* by Wang Yiao, a

mix of drama and comedy, is an enlightening and compelling depiction of the director's generation, born during the one-child policy.

Set in Xining, Qinghai province (northwest China), the story follows three friends, Wang, Sui and Li, who try to start their adult life and fulfil the cultural and social expectations of those that came before them.

The movie opens with dizzying shots of endless, identical high-rises and an unseen protagonist declaring "The value of the Chinese individual is measured in square meters." "Why have they built so many buildings? Are there even people living inside them?," he asks.

We are first introduced to Wang's parents, seated on a couch at a fertility clinic. They reminisce about the golden age of the 80s, when they were among the first families to get a television and a washing machine thanks to their job at a factory. When the factory closed due to the policy reforms, the father was laid off. They are now placing all of their hopes and savings into the IVF treatment for their infertile daughter-in-law. Wang seems to be the least troubled and most practical of the three friends and finds success both in his personal and professional life at the end of the movie.

Li who is about to get married, wants to be a construction contractor and is counting on his parents' money to finance the projects he pitches to his friends Wang and Sui. He tries to uphold the appearances of an up-and-coming entrepreneur with quasi-criminal tendencies, borrowing a BMW, donning temporary tattoos, spending money he doesn't have and making deals with dubious characters who clearly intimidate him. While he comes off as unlikeable and entitled most of the time, some scenes suggest he is just as insecure and vulnerable as his peers, which makes his ending all the more tragic.

Finally, we have Sui, an idealistic and artistically inclined architect who is frustrated with the soulless style of Chinese cities and unsatisfied in his romantic life. His fiancée Lisa, who seems rather stern and cold, wants to wait to have sex until after marriage and criticizes Sui's friendship with Li, claiming he is learning "dirty things from him." The sexually frustrated Sui predictably cheats on her in their bridal bed while she is on a trip to the UK, which ultimately leads to the end of their relationship. She nonetheless supports him when his mother falls ill and is the first to suggest selling their new apartment to fund her treatment.

Sui's business partnership with Li and Wang comes to a head when they reject his original designs for the new kindergartens, suggesting he use the ones off of "Alibaba," more suitable for public taste. He angrily removes the pictures of Bill Gates and other famous "self-made" men from their shared office and leaves. When Li dies, Sui drops out of the project, leaving his shares to Wang.

The themes present in the movie are ones that are often encountered in current Chinese cinema.

The one-child policy, introduced during the late 1970s by

Deng Xiaoping, was an undemocratic and misguided attempt at combatting Chinese "economic backwardness." Deng blamed the latter on "overpopulation" rather than the bankruptcy of the Stalinist program of "socialism in one country."

The failure of this program led the bureaucracy to reintegrate China into the world market on a capitalist basis, a process which began in 1979 and included the opening up for foreign investment, an end to economic planning and the introduction of private enterprises. In 1996, a wave of industrial reforms to close large sections of state-owned industry was carried out, with the goal of causing mass unemployment and ending the lifelong employment system or "iron rice bowl."

The consequences of these developments are made evident in *Great Happiness*: the excessive burden placed on the generation born in the 1980s and 1990s, who are expected to support their parents and grandparents in a declining economy; the poisoning of romantic relationships by the enormous gender disparity and familial pressures as well as the poverty of intellectual and cultural life in a society where money is at the centre of everything.

The characters in Wang's movie are portrayed empathetically, regardless of their choices. Humorous scenes are interspersed, some of which border on silliness but fit with the overall absurd and bewildered tone. The movie also conveys feelings of loneliness and alienation. It has a considerable runtime of 150 minutes, which could be attributed to a genuine interest in grasping and processing the realities the characters and the director's generation is faced with.

In a greeting to the audience that was read before the showing, Wang Yiao explained that his parents are unsatisfied with his career choice and want him to become an official. He quipped that the prize for "best first feature" he was recently awarded would keep them quiet for maybe three years maximum. We hope that he gets to develop further as a filmmaker and look forward to his next feature.



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