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

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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
The one-child policy, introduced during the late 1970s by Deng Xiaoping, was an undemocratic and misguided attempt at combating Chinese “economic backwardness.” Deng blamed the latter on “overpopulation” rather than the bankruptcy of the Stalinist program of “socialism in one country.”

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.