The 75th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 3

Huo Meng's *Living the Land*: A moving portrait of rural China in the 1990s

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This is the third in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted February 20 and Part 2 February 27.

At this year's Berlin International Film Festival, Huo Meng received the silver bear for his feature *Living the Land* (*Sheng xi zhi di*). Set in 1991 in an impoverished village in Henan province, in central China, the film is a moving and vivid portrayal of rural life and the social implications of the country's rapid urbanization. The film is scheduled for release in China later this year.

Living the Land focuses on 10-year old Chuang Li (Wang Shang) and his family. It opens with the exhumation of one of Chuang's grandfathers, who was executed while fighting the Japanese invasion during World War II. He is exhumed to be laid to rest with the remains of his recently deceased widow, Chuang's grandmother.

Chuang's parents, who work as migrant workers in Shenzhen in southern China, then still a relatively small city, come home for the funeral but have to depart soon afterward. We see Chuang's mother for the last time only a few minutes into the film, as she leaves the village, sitting on a bicycle with her husband to return to Shenzhen, crying.

Chuang is largely raised by his grandparents and his aunt, Xiuying (Zhang Chuwen). He is also close to his great-grandmother and his two cousins. One of these cousins, 19-year old Jihua, is mentally disabled. The latter is often subject to the ridicule of other children and beatings from his father, but Chuang, their great-grandmother (Zhang Yanrong) and Jihua's mother love him dearly and do their best to protect him.

There is no electricity in the village and only one family even has an ox with which to plow the land. Life's rhythm is determined by the harvest, by traditional holidays like the Autumn Festival, weddings, births and funerals. The school closes down when the children have to join their parents working in the fields for the harvest. The farmers pay their taxes and the school fees for their children with grain. In one memorable scene, we see the school's principal reject the grain Chuang's cousin brought—his family is the poorest in the village and their harvest did not yield sufficient grain for them to pay both taxes and the school fees.

We learn, in passing, that villagers have to sell their blood to be able to pay their debts and bills—a common phenomenon in rural China in the 1990s, and one of the main causes of the country's AIDS epidemic.

Chuang's great grandparents and grandparents cannot read, but encourage him to study. They are deeply empathetic and hard-working people, painfully aware of the dual oppression they suffer because of their status as farmers and their lack of education.

In one of the most moving scenes, Chuang talks to his great grandmother about her death.

He asks, "Are you afraid of being cremated?"
"Of course, who wouldn't be?" she replies.
"You don't have to be afraid, it's just cells dying that then get renewed, every year."
"What happens with the dead cells?" she asks.
"They get dispersed, some will get buried, others will be carried away by the wind to far-away places."

She responds:"That's good, I've never been anywhere in my entire life." After a short pause, she adds, "It's good that you can read."

Though the period covered in *Living the Land* is relatively brief—roughly six months—we see how a combination of monumental societal changes and the natural cycle of life and death in the village bring Chuang's childhood to an early and rapid end.

By the end of the film, one family can use a small tractor, which can do the work previously done by multiple families. In one scene, the farmers ponder the fact that a single large-scale American agricultural machine could do the work of their entire village. With modern machinery gradually finding its way into the village, more and more farmers leave for the south, for Shenzhen. Foreign companies like Apple

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invested heavily in the "Special Economic Zone" in Shenzhen at the time, which was set up as a key component of the restoration of capitalist relations by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), with extremely low wages and brutal conditions of exploitation for workers like Chuang's parents.

Chuang's close family soon falls apart. One of his aunts is pregnant with her family's third child. The family tries to hide the violation of the one-child policy, which was still in effect at the time, by sending Chuang's other aunt to undergo the government pregnancy examination. But the ruse fails when Chuang's uncle sends his wife to the hospital to give birth, fearing she might otherwise die. The village's party secretary informs them that they have to pay a fine of 3,000 yuan (around $413 today), an exorbitant sum for the family, and suggests that Chuang's other aunt, Xiuying, marry the son of a wealthier family in a neighboring village who has taken an interest in her.

Xiuying agrees, though she is in love with another man and loathes her bridegroom. We do not see anyone trying to pressure her; it is their poverty that seemingly leaves her no choice. Shortly after the wedding, Chuang's mentally disabled cousin Jihua tragically dies; he is blown up by an explosive device that was placed in a wheat field to find oil.

Chuang's great grandmother, who doted on Jihua, passes away shortly thereafter. The film closes with Chuang, his grandparents, his uncle and aunt, carrying her ashes back to the village to bury them. Their primitive tractor gets stuck in the mud and they have to push hard to keep it moving. In one lengthy shot, the camera moves away from the family, zooming out to show the beautiful but bleak and icy landscape in which they plow their land and live their lives.

In an interview during the Berlinale, Huo Meng explained that the motivation for making the film was in part autobiographical—born in 1984, he grew up in a village similar to Chuang's. Chuang's village stands for thousands of similar villages. The character's experience of growing up in extreme poverty, with migrant worker parents, torn between age-old traditions of rural life and a rapid process of urbanization, are those of an entire generation of Chinese.

Huo Meng's realism is deeply empathetic but never sentimental. He shows the at times severe cruelty and brutality of interpersonal relations in the countryside, yet he never humiliates or condemns his protagonists. Rather, his primary concentration remains revealing how conditions of desperate poverty lead to often painful and desperate decisions and behavior. This harsh reality is punctuated by extremely funny scenes and relations of great warmth. The primary driver of the decisions of the generation of Chuang's parents, grandparents and great grandparents is their striving to ensure a better life and future for their children. Hard though the conditions were, they ensured much higher living standards and better education for Chuang's—and Huo Meng's—generation. More than anything else, the film feels like a tribute to the immense sacrifices and hard labor of these generations.

The film conveys the beauty of the landscape and the extremely hard life in Chinese villages shortly after the restoration of capitalism. People like Chuang's parents who moved to Shenzhen, Shanghai or other fast growing industrial centers were part of almost 14 percent of China's population who moved from the village to the city between 1980 and 1991. At the time, the urbanization boom was still at a relatively early stage. Today, 67 percent of the population are living in cities (compared to under 19 percent in 1980), virtually all of them with advanced modern-day infrastructure. Shenzhen is the most extreme example of this process: Its population exploded from just 30,000 in 1980 to 17.5 million today. Even the countryside, Huo Meng noted in the interview, has been modernized to an extent that the filmmakers had a hard time finding a place where they could shoot.

Despite these vast changes and a significant increase in living standards, the film depicts a reality that does not only lie in the recent past. For millions of Chinese workers and farmers and their children, it remains close to their everyday experiences. As of 2024, there are an estimated 300 million migrant workers who still form the most oppressed layer of China's gigantic but still growing working class.

Living the Land is an important artistic achievement. For moviegoers in China, it will depict a reality that for many of them is all too familiar. In other countries, the film can contribute to a greater understanding of an immensely complex society and vast working class that is now being vilified by the imperialist powers in their crazed drive for war.

To be continued

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