

The 75th Berlin International Film Festival—Part 9

Vivian Qu's *Girls on Wire* from China—A doomed attempt to combine social realism with #MeToo

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This is the ninth in a series of articles on the recent Berlin International Film Festival. Part 1 was posted February 20, Part 2 on February 27, Part 3 on March 2, Part 4 on March 6, Part 5 on March 9, Part 6 on March 10, Part 7 on March 16 and Part 8 on March 21.

Vivian Qu's *Girls on Wire* was one of the Chinese films competing at this year's Berlin film festival. It is Qu's third feature. Her second movie, *Angels Wear White* (2017), was a relatively thoughtful portrayal of a teenage migrant worker who witnesses the sexual assault of two girls. Its premiere coincided with the beginning of the #MeToo campaign in Hollywood and beyond.

Although #MeToo has been censored in China, Qu has been associated with it ever since that time. In her public statements, she has highlighted some of the campaign's themes, such as the underrepresentation of and discrimination against women in the Chinese film industry.

Unfortunately, her new film has been severely impacted by this orientation and is significantly weaker than *Angels Wear White*.

The film centers on two female cousins, Tian Tian (Liu Haocun) and Fang Di (Wen Qi), who grew up together like sisters in a smaller city in China. Fang Di's mother sought to take advantage of the restoration of capitalism by the Chinese Communist Party since 1976 by building a small textile factory, but only managed to accumulate debt. Her brother, Tian Tian's father, is a drug addict. He appears to live with his sister's family only to exploit her financially so he can

continue using. From an early age, he seeks to utilize his daughter to obtain money to get more drugs.

The film moves back and forth between the present and recollections of the girls' childhood spent together. The plot is convoluted, but can be briefly summarized as follows.

Though a talented actress, Fang Di is working as a stunt woman in Beijing, subject to gruelling working conditions. She uses most of her earnings to pay off the debt for Tian Tian and her mother's failed business enterprise. We later learn that much of this debt was attributable to her addict uncle's reckless behavior. Tian Tian tries eventually to be rid of her father by calling the cops on him. In interrogations, he gives away names of some of his drug dealers. To take revenge on Tian Tian, the mafia kidnaps her and forces her into drug addiction (why they chose this particular kind of revenge is never convincingly explained). She eventually escapes, but only by killing one of the dealers.

Now, the mafia is after her to "take her back" (why is again not clear). She seeks refuge with Fang Di, after five years during which the two have had no contact. Fang Di, feeling that Tian Tian ruined her life, first sends her away. However, once she learns of the other woman's addiction and that criminals are hunting her, Fang Di goes looking for Tian Tian again and they flee together. Tragedy ensues.

What begins as an interesting depiction of social reality in China in the wake of the restoration of capitalism, descends into a combination of melodrama and gangster movie. The portrayal of conditions of

exploitation in the movie industry are artistically convincing. There are also moving scenes of the children growing up together. There are humorous moments when the gangsters try to kidnap Tian Tian on a film set. Yet beyond the casual laughter it provokes, what we are to take from this scene or the organized crime subplot as a whole? The scenes with the two young women soon become melodramatic and repetitive.

Worst of all, the characters are barely developed. Tian Tian usually looks sad and doomed, and repeats that she only brings bad luck to others. Fang Di is the empowered one in the relationship, but, overall, we learn remarkably little about her. Apart from her relationship with her cousin and her dedication to her work, which appears to dominate her entire life, her character has few distinguishable features. This is unfortunate since both actresses are clearly highly gifted.

Particularly disappointing is the portrayal of the father. Although his drug addiction impacts everyone in the movie in negative ways, we are told nothing about when and why he started using. We usually see him grinning, lurching for new opportunities to extract money from his daughter and sister. As a result, he appears as little more than a monster, perfectly content to drag everyone in his family down into the abyss for the sake of his habit.

To call him a rounded character would be an overstatement. The concept of addiction as a socially conditioned affliction appears entirely alien to Qu. The director seems to have no sympathy for him and no explanation for his behavior. Worse still, she appears to have no interest in even understanding him. Such an attitude on the part of artists toward their subjects has never produced compelling work.

The message of the movie appears not go beyond the platitudes of #MeToo: that “women,” although inevitably the victim, are also “strong,” while men invariably tend to be weak or wicked. With the exception of two mildly positive portrayals of a store worker and Fang Di’s co-worker and friend, all of the male characters in the movie are portrayed in a very negative manner. The burden of work and struggle lies, *Girls on Wire* insinuates, exclusively with women, who would likely be better off alone. The disastrous end for Tian Tian at a young age is attributable not to any

broader societal problems, but the evil personality and decisions of her father.

In an interview, Vivian Qu explained that her main motivation was to show how powerful women are and that they “fight for their freedom.” This may resonate with narrow circles in the upper class in the US, Europe and China, but it is no basis to artistically enrich our understanding of the lives of anyone, including women, in China or anywhere else. Unfortunately, despite the talented cast, *Girls on Wire* is another troubling reminder of the harmful impact of the #MeToo campaign and its underlying conceptions on the arts and cultural climate internationally.

To be continued



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