The Sydney Film Festival screened two movies from China this year: *Shower* and *Seventeen Years*. Both films—the first a light comedy, the second about a female prisoner and an emotional reunion with her parents after 17 years—reflect the response of some Chinese directors to the difficult political conditions in which they work.

The Beijing regime, which is acutely nervous about rigorous artistic work or social commentary, controls virtually all aspects of film production in China. The government's Film Bureau vets scripts, decides when, and if, the finished films can be screened, and whether they can be shown at foreign film festivals. Film directors who have a more honest or artistically probing approach are regularly censored or prevented from making films.

A recent example is Jiang Wen's latest film, *Devils on the Doorstep*. The three-hour movie, which deals with the Japanese occupation of China in the 1930s, recently won the Grand Jury prize at the Cannes Film Festival. According to Beijing, *Devils on the Doorstep* is anti-Chinese. Jiang has been denounced for failing to clear the film with the government before taking it to Cannes. Two government officials even travelled to Cannes to demand that Jiang hand over a negative of the film and urged festival organisers not to show it. *Devils on the Doorstep* has not been screened in China and according to some reports Jiang could be barred from filmmaking for seven years.

Directors have responded in different ways to the political bullying. Some have left the country to practise their craft; others pursue a delicate balancing act attempting to maintain their artistic integrity without antagonising the Film Bureau. Some have adapted to the unfavourable climate and opted to make insubstantial commercial films.

*Shower*, directed by 35-year-old Zhang Yang, fits into the latter category. This occasionally amusing but insubstantial film, Zhang's second feature, tells the story of an ambitious son who returns home and begins to understand the wisdom of his father's old-fashioned values.

Zhang, who graduated from the Central Theatrical Institute in 1992, came to filmmaking through theatre and music video production. *Spicy Love Soup* (1997), his first feature, consists of five lightweight short stories set in contemporary Beijing. The film was a financial success in China and the soundtrack became one of the country's largest selling hit records.

*Shower* begins with Da Ming (Pu Cun Xin), now a successful businessman in southern China, returning home after many years assuming that his father has died. His father, Master Liu (Zhu Xu), however, is not dead. In fact, Liu and Er Ming (Jiang Wu), Da Ming's mentally handicapped brother, own and operate a traditional bathhouse in an old part of Beijing frequented by a quirky cast of characters, who play chess, gossip or generally use it as a refuge from the outside world.

Da Ming, preoccupied for years with business deals and making money, has not told his wife, still in south China, about Er Ming. And while he has little regard for the rundown bathhouse, over the ensuing weeks Da Ming comes to realise that it provides real companionship for his ageing father. Liu, however, eventually dies and the bathhouse and the old suburb are demolished to make way for a new construction project. The film concludes with Da Ming deciding to assume responsibility for his retarded brother and take him to southern China.

While *Shower* may contain a hint of criticism against the government's free market policies, this is entirely secondary to the film's essential message, which is a hackneyed call for a return to traditional family values.

*Seventeen Years*, directed by Zhang Yuan, deals with the emotional reconciliation of a female prisoner and her ageing parents. Touched by a television program on prisoner-family reunions, Zhang obtained permission from the Chinese judiciary to film inside a jail. *Seventeen Years* is an interesting work but not without its flaws.

Zhang, one of the better-known new filmmakers to have emerged in China in the last decade, is a leading member of the “Sixth Generation”. This is a reference to the period when he
graduated from the Beijing Film Academy, the country’s leading film school, which was shut down during the Cultural Revolution.

The academy’s first graduates, after it reopened in 1978, included Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Hang Jianxin and Tian Zhuangzhuang. Later known as the “Fifth Generation,” these directors were distinguished by their innovative techniques, rich and poetic cinematography and dramatic tributes to ordinary people. While the Chinese government banned many of their films, they won a wide international audience in the late 1980s and opened the way for other Chinese filmmakers. “Sixth Generation” directors were more openly critical of the ruling regime and social life. Many of their early films were produced without government permission and circulated on video in China.

Zhang Yuan graduated from the academy in 1989 and made his first film, Mother, the following year. Since then he has made four features—Beijing Bastards (1992), Sons (1995), East Palace, West Palace (1996) and Seventeen Years (1999)—as well as several documentaries, including The Square (1994) and Crazy English (1999). Described as an urban realist because he attempts to explore aspects of contemporary city life in China, Zhang’s work is regularly screened at international film festivals.

Seventeen Years, which is based on a true story, begins at the modest three-room apartment of a poor family of four in an old and rundown part of the northern Chinese city of Tianjin. The husband and wife have each been married once before and their two teenage daughters are from separate marriages. The stepsisters have completely different personalities. Yu Xiaoqin (Li Juan) is a diligent student, while her sister, Tao Lan (Liu Lin), is tough and less interested in school. The two girls, who share the same bedroom, are frustrated with the constrictive atmosphere of the poor household and dream about leaving. Because their parents treat them unequally, the girls have developed an intense rivalry.

One day, Yu Xiaoqin steals the change from her father’s grocery shopping budget and then, after an angry quarrel in the house over the missing money, places it on her sister’s bed. Despite her protests, Tao Lan is blamed for the theft and denounced by her parents. Later, as the girls walk to school, they quarrel and Tao Lan, in a fit of passion, strikes her stepsister on the head with a heavy wooden pole and flees the scene. Hours later she returns home to learn that her stepsister has died. Her parents are so overcome with grief that they cannot speak.

The film then rolls forward to contemporary China and Tianjin First Prison, the jail that has held Tao Lan for the last 17 years. She and several other women regarded by the authorities as model prisoners are given a special weekend release to visit their families. Tao Lan, who has had no contact with her parents since she entered the prison, is ambivalent about meeting her mother and father. Unlike other prisoners, overjoyed with the weekend release, Tao Lan is afraid and uncertain about whether she can face the outside world and what it will bring.

No one comes to meet her on release day and Chen Jie (Li Bingbing), a young female prison guard, offers to take her to the family apartment. After they discover that the apartment has been demolished, Chen Jie helps Tao Lan locate her parents’ new address. Although the bewildered prisoner finds the city hustle overwhelming, and would just as soon go back to the prison, Chen