

Tokyo International Film Festival 2013—Part 1

Two films from China: One is honest and sympathetic, the other is not

By John Watanabe
28 October 2013

At the recent Tokyo International Film Festival (October 17-25) two Chinese films had world premieres. Both stood out, one as a fine and thoughtful work, the other as a deplorable propaganda piece. Significantly, both films are highly conscious of the growing numbers of disenchanted youth with little or no prospects, as well as their considerable social weight and online influence.

Today and Tomorrow (Jintian Mingtian)

Today and Tomorrow is the first feature-length film by director Yang Huilong. It sensitively and sympathetically depicts the plight of millions of Chinese youth who face bleak prospects of unemployment or low-wage, precarious jobs even though they are often highly educated, many holding university degrees.

The so-called “ant tribe,” they are described by an official-sounding radio broadcast halfway through the film as among the most deprived layers, “together with peasants, migrants and unemployed.” At the same time, they are technologically savvy and “opinion makers on the Internet, who can no longer be ignored.”

The film is about three such “ants” in their early to mid-twenties. Ranran and Xiaojie are a couple. They finally manage to move out of a room shared by eight people or so, where the thin curtains covering their bunk beds offer only the flimsiest semblance of privacy, to a dwelling they can have to themselves. It is in a run-down, far-flung suburb of Beijing, scheduled to be demolished. Even so, they can hardly afford it. “The rent is already the cheapest in Beijing,” retorts the landlord when Ranran tries to negotiate it. “I don’t even consider this Beijing,” we hear somewhat later on.

Wang Xu is a male friend of the two. He recommended the accommodation to them, and lives right next door. When Ranran and Xiaojie have sex on their first night

there—“finally a place of our own”—everything is clearly audible through the cardboard walls at Wang Xu’s. His frustration is palpable, and his ways of dealing with it understandable. These include seeking out a local prostitute, though the relationship is ambiguous—we never actually witness any cash changing hands and there’s clearly more between them than simply a business transaction.

Ranran sews and makes clothes in a small shop, but dreams of becoming a designer and selling her own creations. The married owner makes increasingly aggressive advances toward her, but she firmly rejects him and continues to work in the shop. She has little choice. We learn Xiaojie is unemployed. In the three years since graduating, he has sent out “hundreds of CVs,” without result. This inevitably leads to friction between the two. “I live off a woman,” Xiaojie tells his friend.

Wang Xu, on the other hand, works for an insurance company. He experiences the usual grind of a corporate job and is even ordered to falsify customers’ IDs so they can qualify for the insurance the firm sells. This is too much for him, and he is up front with his clients about the fraudulent scheme. His “performance” lags, of course, and he loses the job just like that.

The three face huge pressures. In a memorable scene, they get drunk and sing about their longing for nothing more than a warm embrace, if that is not too much to ask for. Can this generation ever marry and start a family? This is a recurring theme throughout the film. Ranran says she could deal with poverty, horrible conditions, even with being insulted, “as long as I still have my dreams.”

The pressure eventually takes its toll, on the characters individually and on the film’s central relationship. One or

another of the trio may have a future, while the others face pretty bleak prospects. Perhaps the filmmaker intends a certain symbolism? In the present situation in China, one in three young people might stand a chance, a second will be condemned to scraping by and a third will be sacrificed altogether.

The final scene, a flashback, is especially effective, showing Ranran, Xiaojie and Wang at a time when they were carefree, fooling around in Tiananmen Square. The viewer wonders who destroyed their possibility of happiness and where the responsibility for their sufferings lies. The camera zooms in on the flag of the People's Republic of China.

Yang Huilong has spent ten years trying to get this film done. He and many of the crew belong to the "ant tribe." After the screening in Tokyo, Yang emphasized that he sees youth unemployment and the general lack of prospects as global issues, not confined strictly to China. This reviewer looks forward to seeing his next work, and hopes it won't be another decade in the making.

To Live and Die in Ordos (Jingcha Riji)

To Live and Die in Ordos begins somewhat promisingly. A police captain—Hao Wangzhong, 41—has died in Ordos, Inner Mongolia. His funeral is in process, a repulsively orchestrated event. The deceased's son reads a speech that is broadcast to a squad of policemen outside the venue and also monitored by the heads of police and propaganda departments in an office somewhere.

A political journalist, Hua Wei, is summoned to the office. The top brass want him to write on Hao, extolling his virtuous life and work. Hua declines at first, saying he's stopped writing such "heroic" stuff "since 2005," because "netizens" are always probing and in the end exposing such figures as being anything but true to their official characterization. They insist, however, and will provide him with an opportunity to interview Hao's co-workers, family and associates, as well as access to his personal diaries. "If he can withstand your scrutiny all the netizens online will have nothing on him."

One instinctively senses (perhaps hopes) that Hua will unearth some unpleasant truth about Hao, and will then have to choose between his principles and bowing to the power of the state. However, slowly but firmly, the film takes an entirely different direction.

One after the other, the interviewees have nothing but praise for Hao. The picture emerges of an incorruptible, selfless man utterly dedicated to nothing but public duty. He refuses wining and dining, bribes and such. Hao will

not even use his authority to help his closest relatives in the smallest ways; there is nothing but the official way for him. He grew up in a poor peasant family and his father taught him to always do good, Hao's brother offers in way of explanation.

His only "vice," we learn from his wife, is that he even neglected his family for his work. Hao emerges a caricature at times, almost insulting to a viewer's intelligence. For instance, when he has to leave his wife and son to go to work on New Year's Eve, he tells her he has a "duty to serve the people." In lieu of goodbye: "Son, fasten your seatbelt."

As shallow as this is, the film takes a sharp turn for the worse towards the end. Here, Hao is shown faced with a 2010 strike by truck drivers transporting coal. The film lends credence to the worst kind of state propaganda vilifying the strikers. Official television declares that government "demands" this and that many tons of coal, supposedly for the relief of disaster victims elsewhere. The coal shipment strike threatens "major social disturbances" with "disastrous consequences."

Hao strongly pushes, and succeeds, for this to be dealt with as a "criminal activity," rather than a "labor dispute." "These are evil gangsters," he says, before cracking down with full force on a "small number of troublemakers."

Starting out by idealizing and prettifying the ruthless repression mechanism that is the Chinese police, filmmaker Ning Ying inevitably ends up justifying and praising its violent suppression of social discontent. State and provincial propaganda departments are openly credited for backing the film, and can be fully satisfied with the finished product.

At a time when the Chinese ruling elite is spending more on its police than on the military, preparing for a large-scale crackdown on social protests, works like *Ordos* are especially repugnant. One feels, however, that relatively few people will be fooled by it, least of all the young Chinese "netizens" who, as is implicitly admitted in this film, are already winning something of a propaganda war with the state.

To be continued

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