

Sydney Film Festival

Recent films from China: Shower and Seventeen Years

By Richard Phillips
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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.

Shower is one of four new Chinese movies to be released in Australian cinemas by Columbia Tri-Star over the next six months. Although greater accessibility to Chinese language films is to be welcomed, *Shower* is not so different from the hundreds of "feel-good" films churned out every year by Hollywood and other major producers. Many critics have applauded Zhang's undemanding films. One, in a dig at those directors who have attempted to explore social and political issues, has praised Zhang's work because it is "sans peasants, politics or palanquins". Zhang seems to have found a commercially successful formula and is sticking to it.

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 bustle overwhelming, and would just as soon go back to the prison, Chen

Jie gets her home late that night. The mother and stepfather have not forgiven their daughter and at first will only speak to the prison guard. There is little said, but gradually, and with great difficulty, Tao Lan and her parents begin to make emotional contact. The 85-minute film concludes with the years of anger, deep sorrow and other imprisoned emotions between the daughter and ageing parents starting to dissolve.

A fair portion of the film is shot inside the 100-year-old Tianjin First Prison, one of the country's most notorious, and the first recorded inside a Chinese jail. Zhang makes no overt criticism of the penal system and the atmosphere inside the prison is polite and benign. And while this, together with the exceptionally gentle nature of the young guard, grates for those who know something about China's jails, these scenes highlight Tao Lan's tragedy. The now 30-something woman has lost her youth inside the prison walls because of an angry outburst as a teenager. She is isolated, lonely and afraid of the outside world.

Zhang has commented that he made *Seventeen Years* as a counterweight to the large number of vacuous comedies screened in China and in the hope that "a sorrowful story like this one, a human tragedy like this, will provoke Chinese people to think about their real lives and stir their memories of what has happened in the past".

This is an important aim. Unfortunately Zhang, who is able to elicit convincing performances from his actors, tends to treat Tao Lan's past as a combination of personal mistakes and does little to establish the social and historical context of the events. This weakens the emotional intensity of the film and gives it an academic tone.

In fact, the film concludes at the point where Tao Lan and her parents are only just beginning to reestablish their connections. One is left wondering how the family will ever be able to form a loving relationship unless there is some understanding that the tragic accident and the cruel separation of Tao Lan from her family for so many years were products of their debilitating poverty and a harsh legal and judicial system. While Zhang wants his film to encourage people to reexamine their lives and "the past", how can this begin without an attempt to explore, on a deeper level, the relationship between personal tragedies and social circumstances? Zhang's *Seventeen Years*, in contrast to his earlier work, seems to halt at the point where some of these more complex artistic questions arise.

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