

Not One Less by Zhang Yimou:

The harsh reality of the Asian economic "miracle" in a Chinese province

By Mile Klindo
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In the west, Zhang Yimou is China's most acclaimed director. He belongs to the "Fifth Generation" of filmmakers that emerged after the Cultural Revolution. He is renowned for his naturalistic and visually lush depiction of Chinese society, particularly of wide layers of ordinary people.

His feature *Not One Less* (1999) is a story set in the small remote village of Shuiguan about a ramshackle one-room school starved of government funding, and its struggle to survive in the harsh environment of contemporary capitalist China.

Teacher Gao is forced to leave his school to attend to his sick mother, leaving it without a teacher. With the help of the village Mayor Tian, he manages to recruit a temporary replacement. The obvious problem with the substitute teacher is that she is only 13. Also, her only credentials are that she has completed primary education and that there is no other candidate brave enough to take on this thankless task in a rural outpost.

The main instructions given to young Wei are not to lose any more pupils from the school, and to preserve the precious chalk from the carefully counted collection of 27 pieces—that is, one for every day of Teacher Gao's absence.

As a financial reward, Wei is supposed to receive a modest—although by her standards a substantial—amount upon honoring her side of the deal. This potential material gain appears to be the main motivational force behind Wei's wish to teach in the school. She chases the city-bound truck-coach carrying Teacher Gao, in hope of retrieving the money owed to her. Instead, she gets a promise of a future payback upon the teacher's return, on condition that all the pupils remain at school.

Teacher Wei, as her students—who are not much younger than she is—now ironically call her, embarks on a day-to-day struggle to maintain some semblance of order and authority. She writes Teacher Gao's lessons onto the board, then makes her students copy them into their notebooks. A very straightforward plan of action if it wasn't for those mischievous children who sense a trace of shyness clumsily disguised in Wei's bossiness. A particularly disruptive nuisance is 11 year-old Zhang Huike, who, amongst other troubles, causes the crushing of the chalk. His action evokes sympathy towards the helpless Wei from children who previously gave her a hard time. The viewer cannot help but feel the same sense of despair over this significant loss.

In an attempt to discipline the students, Teacher Wei occasionally resorts to locking them up in the classroom and running after those who manage to escape. And so her struggle continues.

A sense of deprivation and the collapse of China's social infrastructure permeate the film. The Asian economic miracle, of which China is regarded as a principal powerhouse, seems to have completely by-passed the country side, as the film painfully—and sometimes comically—documents.

From the very start of the film, the simplicity and relaxed character of village life are beautifully depicted, even amid abject poverty. Zhang Yimou manages this without too much of his customary interplay of bright colours and spectacular cinematography. He succeeds in drawing us in to the down-to-earth charm of his village characters, for whom one cannot help but feel warm sympathy. All the characters in the film, both rural and urban, are locals—non-professional actors—and this adds to the film's sense of authenticity.

Given the non-professional cast, most of the scenes ring remarkably true, especially those involving children. Despite the simplicity of the storyline, the viewer is taken on an eventful journey that is often truly moving. Here again the director shows his previously demonstrated ability to engage the audience in the plight of his characters, his sensitivity and love towards the people he portrays, and a very high level of directing skills.

When a bus carrying an athletics trainer from the state sporting institution arrives, in an attempt to recruit a talented fast runner from the school, Wei displays her stubborn resoluteness in trying to prevent the loss of the student. In this humorous scene, Wei desperately tries to find the young girl who has been hidden by the Mayor. The Mayor approves of the transfer, and reassures the trainer that the girl's parents will as well, when he notifies them of it later. Especially striking is the power exercised by local authority over family matters. In a final effort to "rescue" her pupil, Wei runs after the bus. The Mayor remarks to the trainer that Wei is also not a bad runner. Maybe she could also join the training institute? Everything seems permissible in the pursuit of success, or in the fight for government funding and a higher profile for the school.

Only when her greatest classroom foe, Zhang Huike, is forced to work in the city to repay a debt incurred by his parents, do we see another side of Wei. Now the pace and complexion of the film change. It appears that there are more than monetary concerns driving Teacher Wei in her struggle to bring Zhang back to the class.

All the students begin to adopt a more serious and purposeful approach to their studies, especially arithmetic. The exact bus fare that Wei will need to travel to Jiangjiakou City must be worked out. In one of their calculations, the children decide they will need to move bricks

for 175 hours in the local brick factory to pay for Wei's return fare. In the end, they manage to earn just enough for a couple of cans of coke, which they eagerly gulp down as their reward.

The children's efforts seem to indicate their yearning for their greatest unfulfilled dream—getting to the city themselves. Helping Wei is probably the closest they will ever come to the imaginary prosperity of the outside world.

Finally, the children help Wei sneak into the city-bound bus. Despite being thrown off, she manages to reach her destination after an arduous ordeal on foot and hitchhiking. Now a totally different, more sophisticated picture of China emerges, one of technological prosperity, although punctuated with people holding mobile phones sleeping on the streets.

After an exhausting search, Wei decides to implement her final plan to find Zhang: to plead with the state television chief to allow her to appear live on air, hoping that Zhang might see her. In the following sequences, almost painful to watch but also comically natural, Wei tries to find the chief by stopping every station employee wearing glasses (that was, after all, how the security guard described him).

In an unexpected twist, the station chief calls for the girl after noticing her at the gate for two days and sympathizing with her cause. In the most moving scene of the film, Zhang recognizes the tearful Wei on television and breaks down in tears, unleashing all his pent-up pain, mixed now with happiness. Finally, both children are returned to their village, escorted by shiny-faced beaming media personnel looking for a picturesque slice of China's rural life.

Zhang said that he intended this film to reach a large popular audience in China. It is interesting that *Not One Less* is only his second feature dealing with contemporary China, apart from *The Story of Qiu Ju*, and that both these films were approved by the Chinese censorship authorities. Although not the most radical of China's "Fifth Generation" filmmakers, Zhang Yimou has constantly run into trouble with the authorities.

His work has earned him international acclaim, beginning with his first feature *Red Sorghum* (1988). The visually stimulating, emotionally moving and sensitive manner of his story telling has become his trademark. *Ju Dou* (1990), *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and *Shanghai Triad* (1995) are also beautifully made period dramas about life in China before Mao. *To Live* (1993), spanning the 1940s to the 1970s and the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution is about the epic plight of a family during those decisive decades in Chinese history. It highlights Zhang's underlying critical attitude towards the Chinese state and the backwardness of traditional feudal society. "...The Chinese people's oppression has been going on much longer, for thousands of years. The Revolution has not really changed things. It's still an autocratic system, a feudal patriarchal system..." he has remarked.

The films dealing with the pre-revolutionary era seek to explore the authoritarian and patriarchal relations of the 1920s and 30s, revealing the cruelty and ignorance in ruling institutions also prevalent in today's China. These metaphorical depictions have obviously disturbed the sensitivities of the Chinese establishment. The films have been heavily criticized and some of them even banned, like *Ju Dou* and *Raise the Red Lantern*. All the above-mentioned films earned him a 2-year ban on filmmaking from 1994.

In *Not One Less*, Zhang Yimou has chosen to portray a more compassionate side of state authority. In a similar vein to *The Story of Qiu Ju* (1992), the only other of Zhang's films set in the contemporary period, the message conveyed is that ordinary people can, with

perseverance, utilize sections of the establishment to help themselves.

However, countering the rather conformist and Hollywoodish happy ending, the film displays end titles showing some staggering statistics. Over a million Chinese children are forced to leave school every year due to deteriorating living standards. The message is that even if a rural child were "fortunate" enough to make it to city, he/she would still be obliged to compete with tens of millions of other village migrants for places in city schools that are already unable to accept most applicants. There are even illegal schools being formed by volunteers to cater for the needs of 100,000 migrant children in Beijing alone.

Zhang Yimou in this film provides a telling social commentary of the disastrous effects of the restoration of capitalism in China by the self-styled Communists. This indictment of the market orientation of the current regime is craftily veiled in the charm of simple traditional village ways. Even behind the glossy facades of Jiangjiakou City, one senses the palpably inhumane pressures of poverty and homelessness lurking in the background. The uplifting spirit radiating from the film, together with the optimistic conclusion (just the way Beijing likes it) is perhaps the winning formula in Zhang's struggle against the purveyors of censorship in his country, at least in this instance.

In an earlier interview on freedom of expression, Zhang commented: "Every director in China has a kind of censor inside his mind: even those independent film-makers who claim they only tell the stories they want to tell. If you are to live and work in China, automatically you have that self-censorship, even before you choose a subject or write a script.

"If someone says, 'I don't care about the government, I just do what I want,' this is not true. In order to survive, the best we can do is try to preserve as much of ourselves as we can, however little that may be, in our work."

This statement, together with his resolve to stay and work in China, portraying the most oppressed layers, is testimony to Zhang's seriousness as a director and his desire to probe deeply beneath the veneer of Chinese society. He is not necessarily a consciously 'political' director, but one who seeks to reveal artistically the complexities of the society he cares about.

In *Not One Less*, I believe that Zhang Yimou has managed to fulfil his objectives as a director in portraying a slice of reality of today's China, without compromising his artistic intentions. This is partly because the plot leaves little scope for exposing the regime, apart from the evidently harsh social conditions, and thus allows for a relatively free rein in telling it in its completeness. This is a beautiful work about ordinary disadvantaged people told by a humanist who cares passionately about them.

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