

Xstream Pictures (Beijing) Presents

Life After Life

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A Film by Zhang Hanyi

Produced by Jia Zhang-Ke



66th Berlin International Film Festival Forum

Best First Feature Award Nominee

80mins / Colour

Synopsis:

Industrial development and the migration of population have seen the gradual desolation of the village with few people left and houses collapsed. Some people die, and some ghosts return. Xiuying's spirit who has wandered for over a decade returns to the village by borrowing her son's body. She wants to move the tree she planted in her husband's family yard when she got married. Through her eyes of the past, we see the present land, the living people, reincarnation and the intelligent rocks and animals, which are all occupied in some way for different reasons, just like her.

Director Statement:

In my hometown Shaanxi Province, the place I grew up. Industrial development and the migration of population have seen the gradual desolation of the village with few people left and houses collapsed. In fact, there are countless villages like this in loess plateau and in the whole China, which were once prosperous and flourishing. And in those villages, there are all kinds of folklores orally passed down through generations. All seem to believe that the dead's spirit would come back as it possesses a body, there exists reincarnation and animals would turn into human shapes at their weddings and funerals, although no ordinary people have ever seen such things with their own eyes. So I created Xiuying this figure, an ordinary rural woman who had a confused life, died of an accident at a young age and obviously was not content to be dead like that. After a decade of wandering as a wild ghost, she returned to the almost abandoned village to move the tree in their family's courtyard as if to leave some traces of her existence in this land.

Director's Bio:

Mr Zhang Hanyi was born in Bin County, Shaanxi Province in 1987. He graduated from The Central Academy of Drama in 2009 and shot his very first film *Life After Life* in 2013.

Production Team:

Presented by: Jia Zhang-Ke, Zhang Yong
Associate Producer: Zhang Dong, Justine O.
Script Consultant: Li Zixin
Director of Photography: Chang Mang
Sound Designer: Zhang Yang
Art Director: Yu Haoran
Editor: Matthieu Laclau
Screenwriter & Director: Zhang Hanyi
Cast: Zhang Li, Zhang Mingjun

Cultural Background:

People of different nationalities around the world normally think that human beings are the combination of body and soul. After physical death, body and soul will naturally part with body withers away and soul heads elsewhere. As for where the soul leaves for after death, there are several ideas in Eastern people's mind.

One is that the soul will stay in man's world and fade away with time.

Another is that the soul will drift to the nether world and continue its existence.

The third is that the soul will reincarnate into next life in the form of another human being or animal.

Apart from what mentioned above, there is another one, which is after the soul moves onto the nether world, it returns to man's world as ghost for some unfinished wills. The ghost can only take action by borrowing other living people's body. That is where spirit-possession comes from.

Reality Background:

China is experiencing rapid urbanization. Other than city, rural area also changes dramatically along with this process. The reasons that lead to the quick death of rural communities are nothing else than industrialization and migration. For instance, house collapse caused by mine gobs makes it impossible for people to stay. The construction of factories takes up farmland which people live on. And more and more rural inhabitants are pouring into city for new livelihood. Either reason brings forth the result of deserted villages and leaving villagers. So while the city is burgeoning, the rural communities are dying.

A Different Eye: Q&A With Zhang Hanyi

From one point of view, Life After Life can be seen as a kind of documentary about the quick death of rural communities in Shaanxi. How did you come to the idea of centering the story on a returning ghost? And why?

China is urbanizing very rapidly, and the countryside is changing just as much as the cities are. Rural communities are dying quickly for two clear reasons: migration to the cities and industrialization. What makes country-dwellers flock to the cities? The reasons include house collapses due to abandoned underground mine tunnels, and the building of factories on what used to be farming land, the land from which people made their living. So more and more country-dwellers are looking for new lives and new sources of income in the cities. That's why we're seeing so many deserted villages and derelict houses, and why the cities are burgeoning while country villages are dying.

I come from Shaanxi Province, and the village I was born in is a case in point. When I think back to my childhood, I remember the liveliness of rural life back then and I particularly remember the folk tales I was told. One that struck me very deeply was

the notion that a dead person might come back to inhabit the body of someone living. I never came across a case like that in real life, but this story, set in a dying village, needed what we can call “an eye from the past”. Those who inhabit the past are the dead, so they watch what’s happening to the land now with a different eye. That’s why I brought my memories of local folklore and the fantasies they inspired into this story which records the decline of such villages. You can find visual traces of beliefs rooted in folklore, but folk tales have generally been passed down orally – a vital tradition which may well last longer than the village communities themselves.

I would guess that most of your actors are non-professionals, and the cast-list at the end of the film reveals that some of them keep their real names for their roles. How did you cast the film? Was it hard to get what you needed from your actors?

Yes, most of the actors are non-professionals. They are ordinary people who happen to live where we shot the film. I had general impressions of all the characters while I was writing the script, so when I finished writing I just went back to my old village and chose the people who most closely resembled the characters I’d envisaged. I didn’t really ask them to ‘act’; I hoped they would simply live their normal lives in front of the camera. I never planned to use much editing, and I kept the camera some distance from the actors. What I shot was mostly normal scenes of rural life. I tried to relax the actors by explaining to them what I needed them to do rather than showing them the script. Basically, they wore their normal clothes, did what they normally do and said what they normally say. They got used to it quickly enough, and just ‘acted’. The exception to this was the young actor who plays Leilei, the character whose body is taken over by his late mother Xiuying. He’s an ordinary boy, and obviously has no experience whatsoever of life as a village woman. So I did go through the script with him, scene by scene, explaining the situation and the problems faced by Xiuying, helping him to understand her character. He grasped it very quickly and did a great job.

There’s no overtly Buddhist element in Life After Life, but all the characters accept reincarnation and spirit-possession as facts. Are they Buddhists? Or do their beliefs have some other root?

None of them is Buddhist, but they do accept some Buddhist ideas. Most Chinese villagers have no defined faith or even any clear concept of religion. They certainly don’t follow any one religion, and tend to pick and choose their spiritual beliefs. For example, the idea that reincarnation provides a continuity from generation to generation has become a kind of consensus view, a secret agreement. It helps people to face the deaths of their relatives, and even their own eventual deaths.

Most of your scenes are single, unedited shots, so when you do edit within a scene the effect is rather striking. What are your ideas about staging the action and pacing the film?

I wanted to establish a steady pace for this ‘ghost’ story, and to maintain it from start to finish. That’s why I opted for the ‘one scene/one shot’ approach. Even in scenes which do contain changes of shot, I tried to maintain that pace and tone. When it came to putting it all together, that was still the guiding principle. Of course I wanted smooth transitions from scene to scene, but I tried to preserve the spirit of the way we’d shot the film.

Why did you decide not to use music in Life After Life?

As the leading characters wander through the scenes, we hear all kinds of background sound. Some are industrial noises: the constant hums that come from factories and power-plants, weird mechanical sounds that come from far away. Some are natural sounds: birds twittering, dogs barking, the sound of the wind blowing through the woods. I wanted to use these sounds rather than music because they help me to tell the ‘ghost’ story in an honest and earthy way.

Can we take the captions used near the beginning and at the end of the film as evidence that Leilei does successfully “come back”?

Yes, we can. Xiuying has been gone for some years, and she just borrows Leilei’s body. The idea is that the dead person’s spirit goes to some nether world but returns to this world to take care of unfinished business. A ghost can only do things by inhabiting the body of a living person, so Xiuying’s spirit possesses the body of her son Leilei. That’s what I meant by ‘borrowing his body’. Once the ‘ghost’ has achieved her wish, she has to give the body back to its original owner. And Leilei, the living person, has to come back to face his own life, no matter what the future holds for him.

Interview by Tony Rayns (January 2016)

Xstream Pictures (Beijing)

Xstream Pictures (Beijing) is founded by director Jia Zhang-ke. The company endeavors to gather local and international resources and to invest in, produce and release films.

The feature films the company has produced include:

2016

- Life After Life (Directed by Zhang Hanyi, Berlin International Film Festival Forum); 2016 MoMA New Directors/New Films; Hong Kong International Film Festival, Young Cinema Competition.

2015

- Mountains May Depart (Directed by Jia Zhang-ke, Cannes International Film Festival - Competition)
- K (Directed by Emyr ap Richard and Darhad Erdenibulag, Berlin International Film Festival, Forum; 2015 New Directors/New Films; Hong Kong International Film Festival, Young Cinema Competition - Jury Prize, FIPRESCI Prize); 2015 MoMA New Directors/New Films

2013

- A Touch of Sin (Directed by Jia Zhang-ke, Cannes International Film Festival - Best Screenplay)
- Forgetting to Know You (Directed by Quan Ling, Berlin International Film Festival Forum Section)

2012

- Fidai (Directed by Damien Ounouri, Toronto International Film Festival)
- Memories Look at Me (Directed by Song Fang, 65th Locarno International Film Festival - The Best First Feature Award)

2011

- Yu Lu (Directed by Jia Zhang-ke, Chen Tao, Chen Zhi-heng, Tan Chui Mui, Song Fang, Wang Zizhao, Weitie, Hong Kong International Film Festival)
- Hello! Mr. Tree (Directed by Han Jie, Shanghai International Film Festival - Grand Jury Prize, Best Director Award)

2010

- I Wish I Knew (Directed by Jia Zhang-ke, Cannes International Film Festival – “Un Certain Regard” Section)

2008

- 24 City (Directed Jia Zhang-ke, Cannes International Film Festival - Competition)

2007

- Useless (Directed Jia Zhang-ke, Venice International Film Festival - Best Documentary Award)

2006

- Still Life (Directed Jia Zhang-ke, Venice International Film Festival - Best Film Golden Lion Award)

Wings Project:

"Wings Project" was funded by Jia Zhang-Ke in 2010, to promote young directors and help with their growth. Besides being the producer, Jia also financially funds the selected films. The project has largely fulfilled its original intention since the inauguration six years ago. All seven films presented have received international recognition, among which three are young directors' first film. The main production films including:

2016

- Life After Life (Directed by Zhang Hanyi)
66th Berlin International Film Festival Forum – Best First Feature Award Nominee
40th Hong Kong International Film Festival, Young Cinema Competition
2016 MoMA New Directors/New Films

2015

- K (Directed by Emyr ap Richard and Darhad Erdenibulag)
65th Berlin International Film Festival Forum
39th Hong Kong International Film Festival, Young Cinema Competition
- Jury Prize
- FIPRESCI Prize
2015 MoMA New Directors/New Films

2013

- Forgetting to Know You (Directed by Quan Ling)
63th Berlin International Film Festival Forum Section
37th Hong Kong International Film Festival, Young Cinema Competition
17th Shanghai International Film Festival China Movie Channel Media Awards
- Best Actress
- Best Supporting Actor
21th Beijing Student Film Festival - Best Actress
9th Chinese Young Generation Film Forum – Best Young Editor

2012

- Fidai (Directed by Damien Ounouri)
37th Toronto International Film Festival Documentary Section
2013 FEST - New Directors | New Films Festival - Best Documentary

- Memories Look at Me (Directed by Song Fang)

65th Locarno International Film Festival - The Best First Feature Award,
13th TOKYO FILMeX - Special Jury Prize
27th Mar Del Plata International Film Festival – Special Mention
2012 China Film Directors' Guild – Best Young Director Award
10th International Women Film Festival of Brazil - The Grand Prize
50th New York Film Festival

2011

-Yu Lu (Directed by Jia Zhang-ke, Chen Tao, Chen Zhi-heng, Tan Chui Mui, Song Fang, Wang Zizhao, Weitie)

35th Hong Kong International Film Festival

- Hello! Mr. Tree (Directed by Han Jie)

64th Locarno International Film Festival – Bright Future

14th Shanghai International Film Festival

- Grand Jury Prize

- Best Director Award

- Best Young Director Award

5th Asian Pacific Film Festival – Best Actor

9th Vladivostok International Film Festival - Best Director - Best Actor Award

8th Hong Kong Asian Film Festival - New Director Award

5th Asia Pacific Film Festival - Best Actor Award

12th TOKYO FILMeX - Special Mention Award

10th Reggio Emilia: Asian Film Festival - Best Actor Award

19th Beijing Student Film Festival - Best Film Award

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2016 MoMA New Directors/New Films Screenings: