

A RIVER RUNS, TURNS, ERASES, REPLACES

河流，奔跑着，倒映着

2021 | 87 min | United States | no dialogue | color | documentary

a film by Shengze Zhu

Berlinale, Forum
Cinéma du Réel, International Competition

SYNOPSIS

A portrait of urban spaces along the Yangtze River in the city of Wuhan. An engaging communal stage on which people perform in various ways: some dancing, singing, swimming; some shoveling, welding, and hammering. An evolving landscape that is continuously sculpted by nature and dramatically altered by roaring machines and rising infrastructure. Where desires are planted. Where memories are buried. The lost place.

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DIRECTOR'S NOTE

Growing up in "river city" Wuhan, I always feel connected to the Yangtze. Although most of my childhood memories of the river are blurry, I recall vividly the ceaseless roar generated by the treacherous currents, and the excitement of watching an old man drawing different patterns with hot, liquid sugar in the riverside park.

Initially, what drove me to make this film was a feeling of estrangement. Since I left Wuhan in 2010, I find the city has become more and more unrecognizable every time I went back home. There is always something newly built, or something in the midst of demolition. There is always the smoggy air. The city is working so hard to fulfill its official slogan "Wuhan, Different Every Day"; nonetheless, the traces of the past are almost completely erased. As a showcase of the city's forward momentum, the riverside landscape has been dramatically altered over the past several years. Buildings were torn down, roads were widened, landmarks were rebuilt. The entire area has been renovated again and again. While the city embraces the river as a catalyst for growth, what we have lost in the name of progress? How are we coping with such rapid transformation? How small and alienated one may feel in relation to the city's unprecedented scale of development? With these questions in mind, in the summer of 2016, I started to film urban spaces along the Yangtze River in my hometown Wuhan.

Certainly, at that time, I never thought one day my hometown would experience a public-health crisis that would profoundly change its path and the lives of many others. I never thought the city would capture the world's attention in such a frightening context. I never thought wet market - a place my grandma visits daily - would become a sensitive topic. And certainly, I never thought I would be stranded in another country while all these happened.

I will never forget how helpless and desperate I felt from afar. It pained me more to see from a distance that my hometown was engulfed by panic and despair, and my family and friends were suffering. I felt like a deserter. And it was until this moment that I finally realized, no matter how far I go from the city, I will never manage to leave it.

For a long time, I have tried to escape from this average city. I dislike its extreme weather. I complain about its chaos, the dirty streets and endless construction projects. I feel a bit embarrassed for its residents' reputedly hot tempers. Yet, from time to time, I would dream about the small shop that sells my favorite spicy beef noodles. I was heartbroken when my mom told me after the lockdown that the shop was permanently closed. I have visited it since I was a child. It was one block away from the Yangtze.

So, I decide to turn this film into a letter. It is a letter to the city - not the one in the headlines, but the one in memories. However, summoning up the memory is not to evoke nostalgia; instead, it is to reflect on consequences - to excavate the hints hidden in the ruins, and to seek for figures lost to obscurity. It is a contemplation on the past and the lost, that not only tells what happened, but embodies what could have happened, and what could yet happen.

The other day, my mom sent me a picture of her on the riverbank. I could hardly recognize her, as she was wearing a mask, a hat and sunglasses. Besides this, surprisingly, everything looked familiar: the hazy sunshine and indistinct skyline, a ship passing by, and the choppy river. I seemed to hear the roar. I recalled what Calvino once wrote: "it is not the voice that commands the story: it is the ear."

Shengze Zhu
January 23, 2021

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Shengze Zhu (b. 1987) is a filmmaker from China now based in Chicago, USA. She co-founded with Zhengfan Yang a production company BURN THE FILM, that is dedicated to creating and supporting moving-image works with singular voices.

FILMOGRAPHY

Out of Focus / 虚焦 Xu Jiao
(2014, 88 min, Cinéma du Réel)

Another Year / 又一年 You Yi Nian
(2016, 181 min, Visions du Réel - Best Film Award)

Present.Perfect. / 完美现在时 Wan Mei Xian Zai Shi
(2019, 124 min, International Film Festival Rotterdam - Tiger Award)

A River Runs, Turns, Erases, Replaces
(2021, 87 min)

CREDITS

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