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FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2023 OFFICIAL SELECTION

ONLY THE RIVER FLOWS

A FILM BY WEI SHUJUN

2023 – CHINA – THRILLER – MANDARIN – 101'

mk2
FILMS

SYNOPSIS

1990s, Banpo Town, rural China. A woman's body is found by the river. Ma Zhe, Chief of the Criminal Police, heads up the murder investigation that quickly leads to an obvious arrest. As his superiors are keen to communicate their success, several clues push Ma Zhe to delve deeper into the hidden behaviour of his fellow citizens.

INTERVIEW WITH WEI SHUJUN - Director

After a semi-autobiographical youth story (*Striding into the Wind*, Official Selection Cannes 2020) and a dark comedy about the making of a film (*Ripples of Life*, Directors' Fortnight, 2021), *Only the River Flows* is a classic film noir. Each of your films has dealt with different genres and corresponding styles. For a young director, what are the challenges and excitement of such "variety" for you?

As a young filmmaker, my first thought is what I can do and what I can't do, so finding a project that excites me and also is new to me is a logical creative process. Making *Only the River Flows* gives me the opportunity to develop a story within the frame of a genre film, on a literary basis: it's definitely different from the autobiographical story or "satire" of the making of a film like my previous two films were trying to present. The adaptation of Yu Hua's short story has several original settings: first of all, the story of a series of murders, written by Yu Hua in the literary style of the 80s and 90s, which bears the themes that were very present at the time, such as the excessive weight of the collective spirit weighing on the individual and the solitude of the latter in the face of an absurd world. The original story also shows a certain subversion of the traditional detective narrative: the resolution of the mystery is not its only issue; besides, the work also has a more secret, unexpected, obscure feature, which has contributed to the novella being considered an avant-garde work.

How did you come to get this project?

The project was proposed to me, and I found the Yu Hua novella very appealing. The fact that it wasn't his most well-known allowed me to rework and expand the story, which gave me the freedom to distance myself from it and to explore the many possibilities, and that's what interested me.

What possibilities did you see exactly?

The uncertainty that weighs on the entire story in the novella provides a certain space for the film, allowing it to offer a second interpretation of the text. The ambiguity of the novella can lead it to be read as a fable, an enigmatic reflection on fate, or even a portrayal of social relationships through the depiction of multiple characters. Another essential aspect of the original work is the time period in which the story is set.

Were you tempted to change the timeframe?

A simple reason led to the difficulty of this modification: the advancements in forensic medicine techniques might render this case less plausible in present times. Moreover, shifting the story's timeframe would have required a series of modifications that might have finally appeared purely decorative. And, keeping things unchanged also meant a respect to the nature and spirit of the original work. I must also say that the purpose of this story is not necessarily tied to its era; the novella has retained significant resonance even today. Lastly, I liked the idea of filming the era in which I was born and raised, and I have to admit that there

is a growing desire in me to understand that decade, which also helps in understanding what China has become today.

Reviving an era is not a sufficient motive in itself, and nostalgia can even prove to be a pitfall. I believe we should avoid the emotional response that the "vintage" effect can evoke. It's always easy to find an old tape recorder or recreate the approaches of investigations of the police from that time, but capturing the essence of that era is a completely different challenge. I went through many photo albums from the 1990s, where one can see that people back then were generally simpler than they are today. Most still believed in a certain collectivist supremacy, so self-concern or the expression of individual feelings didn't come naturally. In the film, I wanted to highlight individuals who, with a united effort, constitute the masses and yet stand out from them.

What were the main modifications made to the original work?

I thought the tone of the film should be more realistic and that the plot should be stripped of any whimsical or abstract relationships that could make it artificial. The film focuses on the character of Ma Zhe, who is much more than the mere "eye" and that's what he was in the first part of the novella. While Ma Zhe actually kills the Mad Man in the novella, in the film, the murder only takes place in his dream.

What have you learned through the writing and directing of this film?

I learned not to initially focus on metaphor but instead concentrate on the visual and audible elements that constitute cinema. Metaphor can come later, especially after all the elements have been put in place. The simpler and more direct the film is, the greater its impact would be on the audience. What I wanted to show is that destiny mocks people: the more we try to deeply discover the meaning of life, the more likely we are to miss it. I really like the quote from Albert Camus I put at the very beginning of the film: "We do not understand destiny, and that's why I have made myself destiny. I have assumed the foolish and incomprehensible face of the gods."

I had already tried a bit on film before this project, and I enjoyed the experience. Since the story is set in the 90s, the idea of using film again came up naturally. But it wasn't easy; the producer informed me that shooting on film would be much more expensive, and the absence of labs in China that could process 16mm film would pose problems. The colorist also mentioned the possibility of achieving a "film look" during post-production. However, I insisted because the texture of film itself truly contributes to creating a sense of time which I was trying to pursue.

How did shooting on film change your way of working?

Since there could not be as many takes as we wanted due to cost/budget constraints, we had to do many more rehearsals. Making a film on film is more challenging: during the shoot, we can only see the framing, composition, and focus, and the monitor showed mostly static or snowflakes. So, we only discovered the image afterwards, and we work in a kind of fog. But when you can't see much, you have to learn to feel if the actor's performance is good, and if the scene is well-paced. And there is something a little wonderful about all of this.

How did you choose and direct the actors?

As for the casting, I made quick decisions based on my impressions and intuitions. Then, I tried to give the actors time by having them arrive very early at the shooting locations. For example, Zhu Yilong, who plays Ma Zhe, arrived a little over forty days before the start of shooting. He was waiting for me to give him "secret crafts" on how to prepare, but I didn't really have any. I just asked the local police if Zhu could accompany them on some of their investigations, and witness interrogations. He also practiced in shooting and got used to wearing clothes from the 90s. This period of preparation was also necessary for me to make adjustments based on what I observed from the actors' behaviors. If we only tried to get everything ready on set, it would actually be too late.

Zhu Yilong's performance is perfectly suited to the film's style, understated and discreet, not drawing attention to his acting. But he succeeds in expressing the character's gradual descent into darkness...

Around the middle of the shoot, Zhu Yilong said to me with a worried expression, "I'm just walking, I don't feel like I'm acting." I told him that's precisely what I wanted: the actor's strength should come from within. When you force too much, the character becomes artificial. Actors often think the opposite: they fear not giving enough, or they're afraid of disappointing and frustrating the audience. Furthermore, during the shoot, I realized that when the actor's performance changes, the way of filming must be modified. Direction and the actor must be considered together, with the same perspective, constantly adapting to each other.

How long did the shooting take?

Just before the shoot, the COVID-19 pandemic was surging again, and the entire team had been locked down in our hotel with a prohibition on going out. It was very stressful. We had around forty-five days of preparation and approximately forty-five days of shooting. We had to pause for two days when Zhu Yilong and I tested positive.

The film was edited in record time. How did you proceed?

Working with the editor was straightforward. Matthieu Laclau hardly ever read the script; he asked his assistant to give him a rough overview of the story, then he looked at the filmed footage and constructed the editing solely based on what he has understood. We shot in chronological order of the narrative, and he edited as the shooting progressed. Often, I would

see a first cut of what we had filmed the day before on the next day. We finished shooting on February 1st, the first version of editing was completed on the 7th, and the locked one was done on February 13th.

The final scene evokes a sense of harmony and peace, but when the baby looks straight into the camera, it is a bit “uncanny”. Why did you choose this ending?

Even though everything seems to be over, with warm light and a harmonious atmosphere, and the child appears healthy, he looks at the audiences as if challenging them: it doesn't all end here. The criminal and police case is undoubtedly resolved, but there are nightmares to come, somewhere in the shadows, waiting to emerge.

ABOUT WEI SHUJUN - Director

Wei Shujun was born in 1991 in Beijing, China. He started his career as an actor at 14 year old. He completed his master degree at the Communication University of China. His films include ***On the Border*** (short, 2018, Special Jury Award at Cannes Film Festival), ***Striding into the Wind*** (2020, Official Selection Cannes Film Festival) and ***Ripples of Life*** (2021, Directors' Fortnight, Cannes).

FILMOGRAPHY

- 2023** ***Only the River Flows*** – Feature Film
(Un Certain Regard, 76th Cannes Film Festival)
- 2021** ***Ripples of Life*** – Feature Film
(Directors' Fortnight, 74th Cannes Film Festival 2021)
- 2020** ***Striding into the Wind*** – Feature Film
(Official Selection, 73rd Cannes Film Festival)
(Feimu Awards Best Actor, 4th Pingyao Film Festival)
- 2018** ***On the Border*** – Short Film
(Special Jury Award, 71st Cannes Film Festival)

CAST

ZHU Yilong

Chloe MAAYAN

HOU Tianlai

TONG Linkai

MA Zhe

BAI Jie

Chief of Police

Xie

CREW

Director	Wei Shujun
Scriptwriters	Kang Chunlei, Wei Shujun
Director of Photography	Chengma
Director of Sound	Tu Duu-Chih, Tu Tse-Kang
Production Designer	Zhang Menglun
Costume Designer	Su Chao
Editor	Mattieu Laclau
Chief Colorist	David Rivero
Production	KXKH Film
Executive Producers	Tang Xiaohui, Dorothy Zeng, Li Chan
Producers	Tang Xiaohui, Huang Xufeng, Li Chan, Shen Yang
Co- producers	Wang Chenlin, Liang Ying
Associate Producer	Zheng Bin, Zhao Jin

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