

Film Review

***Yinru chenyan* 隱入尘烟 (*Return to Dust*),**

Directed by: Li Ruijun 李睿珺, China 2022, 133 Minutes.

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With the film *Yinru Chenyan (Return to Dust)*, the young director Li Ruijun (born 1983) created an impressive memorial to his homeland Gaotai in the province of Gansu. The film premiered in February 2022 at the 72nd Berlin International Film Festival. In China it was released in July 2022 but unfortunately [after initially being given a more conciliatory ending by the censors] had to be withdrawn from cinemas in September of the same year, as the central government was apparently not satisfied with the portrayal of poverty and corruption in the rural regions.

The long film shows the touching care of a sprightly small farmer for an impoverished and slightly disabled woman. Despite extreme poverty and many external pressures (sudden move out of their own house, forced blood donations), the already rather elderly couple discover joy in working together in the fields and with the domestic animals (chickens, donkeys) on the small farm. However, as they begin to hope for a better future, the wife falls ill, falls into the ditch next to the road and drowns. The sympathetic farmer, who for so long had radiated serenity, caring, a spirit of work, but also a quiet joy in life, follows her in death.

The two main characters are Ma Youtie 马有铁 (played by amateur actor Wu Renlin 武仁林) and Cao Guiying 曹贵英 (played by the well-known film actress Hai Qing 海清). Cao Guiying, a gaunt, hunchbacked woman in her forties, lives with her brother and his wife, but in a dirty wooden shack that can barely withstand the elements. Many years ago, she gave a beggar in the village a piece of bread but because of that she was beaten by her relatives so harshly that for weeks she could not walk. Since then, she lost all pleasure in life, even more so since she is incontinent and also unable to have children. Her brother and sister-in-law treat her uncharitably and want her out of the house, so they arrange a marriage with the already somewhat aged but unmarried Ma Youtie. Ma had to work for his elder brother in the fields for many years without pay and was exploited by him. Although his brother is doing quite well economically, Ma Youtie is only allowed to live in an abandoned, empty room in the village where he looks after his donkey. The villagers mock him: “No one is poorer than you.”

Youtie and Guiying's marriage is extremely simple but it slowly begins to transform the quiet suffering of the disabled woman into an increasing joy in life. Ma does not take offence at his wife's bed-wetting, he does not scold her when she fetches water in her slow, limping step, but simply lifts her onto the donkey cart when, for example, they go to the ancestral grave on the edge of the desert to burn paper money and pray to the ancestors. Together they till the field. The donkey replaces the tractor. The farmer hatches ten chicks in a cardboard box; he plans to use the money from the chicken breeding to have his wife's ailments medically treated one day. All farmers in the village have to hand in their grain to the grain office in the village where they receive seed and a little money; quite often, however, the money is not paid or is paid late. When the head of the grain office is stricken with a mysterious disease, the villagers are urged or forced to donate blood for him, but only Ma Youtie has the "panda blood group" with which to cure the man. (The fact that there is supposed to be a "panda blood group" is an allusion to certain exploitative tricks with which the uneducated rural population is often duped and exploited). Ma Youtie is driven to town in a speedy car to donate blood, but Guiying, who accompanies him, vomits and wets the car seat. She has never ridden in a car before. The good-natured farmer Ma, who quietly accomplishes everything he is asked to do, does not accept any gifts for his repeated blood donations and instead asks that the grain money finally be paid out to the villagers.

When a new regulation offers money for the demolition of empty old buildings in the village, Ma and his wife are simply evicted. But the sprightly farmer builds his own house out of mud bricks, and the increasingly active Guiying helps him build it. The film shows the traditional work and the building of the house with homemade air-dried mud bricks. (The region of Gaotai is located on the Silk Road on the Loess Plateau of northwest China, where the soil is generally clay-like and can be a good building material when mixed with water). Guiying is still handicapped in all this work in the fields and on the house, and is also once scolded by her husband because of her clumsiness, but overall the two get along so well that the women in the village say Guiying is more loved than any other wife.

The film has a number of lengthy sequences and is generally wordless and lacking in action, which probably best reflects the uneventful life of the peasants in Gansu. Everything that is spoken is in the local Gaotai dialect, which is incomprehensible to most Chinese. However, the strip impresses with its silent language of strong symbols: a small straw donkey woven by Guiying, an auspicious character stuck to the mud wall, the collective threshing of grain followed by a bath in the cold irrigation ditch. Any depiction of conjugal love or eroticism is faded out; what is depicted is a silent, simple, selfless, almost child-like love with which the farmer Ma finally coaxes a laugh out of his wife, who has been so hardened by long years of suffering.

But the happy days together with their domestic animals in their new house soon come to an end. Guiying falls ill and during a visit to the village she gets dizzy and falls into the ditch. No one is there to save her. When Ma Youtie hears of his wife's death, he is deeply affected. He slowly prepares the burial in the desert, burns paper money again in front of the simple earthen mound of the grave, then in a symbolic gesture takes the horse's collar from his donkey and sends the animal away. At home, he lies down on the earth bed (the

kang, heated in winter), under the photo of his beloved Guiying, and takes his own life with the help of some pesticide.

The last shot shows an excavator razing the house built by Ma and his wife to the ground. There is money from the government for the demolition of unused buildings ...

It was predictable that the central government would take offence at this film. It is set in 2011 and tries to depict the real situation of the villagers. This also means that the extreme difference between rich and poor, between town and country, between healthy and sick people, between exploiters and exploited becomes quite manifest. The excavators, symbol of government power, mercilessly tear down the mud huts of the poor people. It is the weak, the disabled, the sick, the uneducated, deprived peasants in the remote villages who have to live a hopeless life of silent suffering until they “return to dust.” If they get a high-rise flat in a smaller town through government regulations, it means that they would have to part with their beloved animals (donkeys, chicken). However, the fact that Ma Youtie is a person so full of life and so kind-hearted through contact with nature, and that through his hard work and selfless care he is able to bring an introverted and disabled woman back to a somewhat happier life, is almost a miracle, and Ma appears, as it were, like a saint in a world of heartlessness and exploitation. In the end, however, even he has no hope: the repeated burning of paper in front of the ancestral burial mounds in the desert and the demolition of the mud huts, with clouds of dust rising, speak the same language: everything returns to dust and smoke.

All in all, a very moving and thought-provoking film with great nature shots from the ancient farming region of the Chinese Silk Road. One is reminded of one of Rilke’s words: “For you [God] are not the One surrounded by beauty and wealth. [...] You are the farmer with the beard, from eternity to eternity.”