



© Ma Li



Qiu Inmates

Ma Li

Producer Ma Li. **Production company** Ma Li (Peking, People's Republic of China). **Director** Ma Li. **Editor** Ma Li. **Music** Yang Haisong.

Colour. 280 min. Mandarin.

Premiere February 15, 2017, Berlinale Forum

The first conversation with the friendly caregiver already sends a chill down the spine: „What's your former profession?“ she asks jovially. The newly admitted patient hesitates. „Why former? I still work as a university lecturer.“

Director Ma Li spent over a year observing the patients at a mental asylum in northern China. Many of them have been here for years, yet there are no traces of their stay. No pictures adorn the walls, nor are there any personal possessions on the dormitory night tables. The inmates wear the same patterned pyjamas day and night. The heavily desaturated colours lend the film an almost black-and-white quality, underscoring the chilly atmosphere. When someone wears their own jumper here over the institutional clothing, it comes across like an act of resistance. And yet while the seasons change outside, any hope of ever experiencing freedom again wanes.

Over five intense hours, *Qiu* raises the question of how ill-defined the border between sanity and madness actually is. The film provides no answer. But it allows us to experience how quickly exceptional circumstances can become routine.

Christoph Terhechte

The so-called rational world

Qiu is my third film to address the dilemma of man. I want to depict a suffocating situation in life: lonely patients caged in a big jail built in the name of medical science. Serious mental illness that cannot be fully cured constantly draws them into ridiculous hallucinations; they can neither figure out this nightmare nor destroy it. Medicine returns them to sanity and reality for a short while. In this so-called rational world, the seeming warmth conceals the real coldness. They are forced to submit to the order of reason. They torture themselves and confess under the doubly heavy pressure both from society and their families. The period of their sanity is short; soon they will get lost in the chaotic hallucinations again and again. 'We live not in a ruined but a bewildered world. We are as forlorn as children lost in the woods.' (Franz Kafka)

Ma Li

"They become mad because of the disease, but their madness is a reflection of the madness of society"

How did you decide to film in a mental hospital and what was your first contact with the institution?

Ma Li: I had planned for a long time to make a film about psychiatry as part of my 'Human Dilemma' trilogy. But it is very difficult to get permission to film in a mental hospital in China. I was very surprised that I was able to obtain permission to film in this mental hospital after years of waiting. They offered me the choice between the men's ward and the women's ward. In the end, I chose to film in the men's ward.

During the film we get the impression that most of the patients forget the presence of the camera while they are telling their stories. How did you approach your protagonists, and how much time did you spend in the hospital?

I stayed in the secure ward for about three months. During those three months, I didn't turn on my camera, because I didn't want my filming to be a predatory behaviour. Instead, I stayed with them; I kept explaining my intention to film the hospital, and I wanted to make sure they understood that they have the right to refuse to be filmed. Most of the patients in the ward I was in have severe schizophrenia. They are very sensitive and are constantly vigilant around the camera. I had to make sure that my presence there and my camera would not hurt them. It was a very long process. It took me three months for them to gain a sense of what I intended and to understand my thoughts. Then I started filming, which took one year.

In the film, relatives and patients mention the financial pressure some of them are under. Is there a health insurance system in China?

Most of the patients have medical insurance, but insurance often doesn't cover all of their medical expenses. The economic pressures come not only from medical expenses, but also from the patients' own living conditions. A patient with severe schizophrenia has lost the ability to work. Even if he or she has the intention of working, it is hard for society to accept them. So the patient's family is often very poor. Some of these families even have more than one member with schizophrenia.

Only once do you show a doctor's consultation and you abstain from showing therapies and other daily routines, like meals. You also avoid any explanation of the institution's structure. What were the reasons for those decisions?

In fact I filmed a lot of daily life at the hospital and the treatments. Those parts are very good and impressive as well, but I didn't choose to put them in the final film. I wanted to give the stage to the patients. I want these silent men to begin to talk. I wanted to challenge the stereotype of schizophrenic patients – the stiff body after taking medicine, the blunted affect, the mad words, and the violence. They are just normal human beings, human beings with a psychological illness. They become mad because of the disease, but their madness is a reflection of the madness of society. Because it is unable to fully cure the disease, they may struggle with it for the rest of their lives. They cannot find a way to free themselves, and they cannot turn back time to save themselves from it.

Interview: Gabriela Seidel-Hollaender, January 2017



Li Ma was born in 1975 in Zhuji, Zhejiang, China. She studied Chinese linguistics in Beijing from 1999 until 2002. *Qiu* is her third full-length documentary film.

Films

2011: *Wujing / Mirror of Emptiness* (120 min.). 2012: *Jingsheng / Born in Beijing* (240 min.). 2017: *Qiu / Inmates*.