

Press Release

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Electric Shadows: Forum Features Chinese Cinema

The International Forum of New Cinema will present a total of 13 productions from this year's featured country, the People's Republic of China. The motto of the programme is "electric shadows", the literal translation of "dian ying", the Chinese word for film. Although purely coincidental, the term perfectly describes the passionate, committed and surprising emergence of a new generation of young independent filmmakers in the shadow of the official Chinese system.

The new generation of filmmakers, the "DV revolution", was set in motion through the availability of digital equipment in Beijing - the capital of independent filmmaking. Given the prevailing conditions in China, this is anything but a hollow advertising slogan. The new Chinese cinema alarms, astonishes and arouses debate about the country's dramatic social upheavals. It predominantly addresses burning social issues: homelessness, drug addiction, unemployment and the consequences of the science fiction-like urbanisation of this vast empire.

But for all the differences between the various films and video productions presented, they are all linked by an enormous desire to explain. "My generation has a duty to document the current phase of the shift in our society," says one young director who prefers to remain anonymous. "In so doing we may not change the situation much, but I couldn't live with myself if I didn't react to what I was witnessing."

One of the most striking films is *Chen Mo he Meiting* (Chen Mo and Meiting), Liu Hao's debut feature film about two people in Beijing as incapable of loving as they are desperate for love. The story, the locations and the actors appear so realistic and authentic that it only takes a few minutes to realise that films about the Beijing of today cannot close with a simple happy ending.

Hai xian (Seafood) is also about an unusual love story that could only really happen in China. Set in a rundown provincial town, the film tells an absurd and entertaining tale of how a policeman falls in love with a prostitute he is sent to investigate, which he obediently continues to do -

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albeit somewhat distractedly. By contrast, the urban characters who spend a mysterious long weekend on the banks of the Yangtse river in *Mi yu shi qi xiao shi* (Weekend plot) are so cosmopolitan and trendy that they would blend in perfectly in any disco in the western hemisphere. The thoroughly modern story contrasts strikingly with the ancient scenery, which will soon be flooded by a vast dam. The viewer need not even know this to notice the film's both strangely elated and apocalyptic mood.

Two productions about lesbian relationships clearly highlight how little separates fiction and documentation in the new Chinese cinema. Ying Weiwei's documentary *He zi* (The box), whose two protagonists speak with remarkable openness about Chinese family structures and sexual relations, and Li Yu's feature film *Jin nian xia tian* (Fish and elephant) are almost like complementary parts of a puzzle. The leading roles in Li Yu's film are played by a genuine lesbian couple, both untrained actors, and perhaps this is one reason why we are so willing to believe every jealous, loving, sad sentence they utter in front of elephant cages and in fashionable boutiques.

Ning Ying's documentary *Xi wang zhi lu* (Railway of hope) on itinerant workers is linked in similar fashion to Du Haibin's long-term study *Tie lu yan xian* (Along the railway). Ning Ying accompanied a group of unemployed southern Chinese people as they travelled for several days by train in search of work picking cotton in the western province of Xinjiang. En route, she discovered why these people are happy and confident about embarking on this terrible journey. As we discover in Du Haibin's portrait of homelessness, life next to the tracks is considerably more hopeless and sinister. *Along the railway* is characterised by great sympathy towards and proximity to its protagonists. This representation of reality, which places far greater store by emotions and ethics than sleek, objectifying professionalism, is one of the outstanding hallmarks of the new Chinese cinema.

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