

investigative mindset, but also its imbrication with filmmaking — the way cinema and police work are two complementary technologies for managing the populace.

Once it becomes apparent that the wrong man may have been arrested for the old woman's murder, Ma is forced to battle against his own instincts which, he discovers, are tied to common social prejudices. Is the old woman's ward, referred to as "the madman" (Kang Chunlei), under suspicion because of his cognitive impairments? Is Xu Liang (Wang Jianyu), the hairdresser, actually guilty, or is he confessing because he knows his queer sexuality ensures he'll be framed? These ethical crises only intensify when Ma and his pregnant wife (Chloe Maayan) learn that their unborn son has a high risk of birth defects, which would mark him as another unwanted "other" in a society of rampant xenophobia.

To his credit, Wei offers no easy solutions to these problems — nor to the crime itself. Not unlike Bong's *Memories of Murder* or Dominik Moll's recent French film *The Night of the 12th*, *Only the River Flows* examines crime not as a rift in the social fabric, but as the logical outcome of oppression so complete that it tends to elude notice. It's no secret that Chinese cinema has suffered artistically under Xi Jinping's regime, even as it has reaped truckloads of money. *Only the River Flows* provides a very welcome sign of life. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

1990s small town China. A woman's body washes up in the local river. The chief of police, Ma Zhe, is tasked with heading up the investigation. An obvious perp leads to a hasty arrest, though the mystery lingers in Ma Zhe's mind. What kind of darkness is truly at play here? Director Wei Shujun's murky throwback film noir, gritty, textured film grain captures the pulpy proceedings. Torrents of rain envelop the characters as they descend into madness in pursuit of the truth. Equal parts atmospheric tour-de-force and beguiling puzzler, *Only the River Flows* is a masterfully styled ode to a bygone cinematic era and a sharp-edged portrait of provincial paranoia. *Official selection: Cannes, Viennale, BFI London Film Festival.*

TRT: 101 min

Only the River Flows by Clarence Tsui

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Once a trailblazing and taboo-smashing genre that set the international film festival circuit alight, Chinese neo-noir has yielded increasingly diminishing returns in recent years. Fatalist films probing the country's dark underbelly have largely been replaced by overblown spectacles in which style trumps substance.

Only the River Flows is poised to buck that trend. An adaptation of Yu Hua's absurdist short story from 1987, Wei Shujun's third feature offers a mix of dead-end detective work, doomed characters and surreal dreamscapes. Premiered at the Cannes Film Festival, the film is a commentary on a society alienated by change.

Only the River Flows is set in a grey, provincial China in the 1990s, an era brought vividly to life through digital camerawork and footage shot on 16mm film stock. The story revolves around the discovery of the corpse of an old woman in a waterside clearing in a small town. While everything points to a local madman (Kang Chunlei) as the culprit, the ultra-diligent case officer Ma Zhe (Zhu Yilong) sees something amiss in the seemingly watertight evidence and effortless arrest of the suspect. Instead, Ma clings on to the loose ends he discovers: an abandoned handbag near the dead body, sightings of another suspect at the crime scene, and a witness who says he's ready to be framed for the killing. Meanwhile, the madman escapes from detention and the body count spikes.

Pressured by the local police chief (Hou Tianlai) to close the case, and troubled by his wife's problematic pregnancy, Ma begins to unravel. As he trudges towards a final showdown with his quarry, he's not even sure where reality stops and fantasy begins – a

confusion that also plagues the viewer. But maybe that's the point: more than just a simple whodunit, *Only the River Flows* is more about the stage on which the characters' repressed fears and erratic behaviour play out.

Wei's masterstroke is to make a disused cinema one of the film's main locations; it is first taken over by the police as a makeshift control centre, and is where Ma hallucinates about the suppressed secrets of the townspeople. Finally, it is transformed into the venue for a lavish, dreamlike public ceremony celebrating the resolution of the crime. The surreal mise-en-scène provides room for multiple readings: it could be a commentary about the relationship between the state and the arts, an Orwellian critique of a society devoid of trust, or simply a man's fears about fatherhood wrought visually large. Wei has left things open enough for interpretation. What is not in doubt is his standing as one of China's most complex cineastes.

Only the River Flows by Michael Sicinski

The following article was originally published by InReviewOnline, May 26, 2023

Although his name may be unfamiliar to some, Chinese director Wei Shujun has already made several feature films, including 2021's *Ripples of Life*, which also debuted at Cannes. But Wei seems poised for a significant breakout with *Only the River Flows*. This knotty, complex police drama combines elements from genre masters like Kiyoshi Kurosawa and Bong Joon-ho, but nevertheless displays a highly individualistic sensibility. The story centers on a highly regarded police detective, Ma Zhe (Zhu Yilong), in the rural town of Banpo. He's been tasked with solving the murder of an elderly woman (Cao Yang). But what at first appears to be an open-and-shut case soon reveals unexpected layers of social dysfunction.

This is a fairly standard noir set-up: that one case that the genius detective couldn't solve. However, by setting the action in 1995, Wei is able to show just how burdened Ma's task force is with oversight from the CCP, and the oppressive need for a neat conclusion and the positive PR that would come with it. When Ma voices that he thinks the cops have maybe rushed to judgment, he is told, in no uncertain terms by his boss (Hou Tianlai), to sign off on the paperwork and move on, because "our superiors are watching."

One notices something quite remarkable about *Only the River Flows* right off the bat. The first Chinese feature in many years to be shot on celluloid, the film looks very much like an actual artifact of the mid-'90s. Exhibiting the same muted palette and soft lens one sees in early Hou Hsiao-hsien or Jia Zhang-ke films, River exhibits a physicality that feels genuinely oppressive. When one considers that Wei has Ma's team set their offices up in an abandoned movie palace, it's evident this director isn't only interested in the