

Acropolis Cinema presents



April 19, 2019 ~ 8:00pm ~ Echo Park Film Center

ABOUT THE FILM

A striking debut from China's Qiu Sheng, *Suburban Birds* is a tantalizing mystery and a bitter-sweet coming-of-age comedy rolled into one. Hao (Mason Lee) is part of a team of young engineers called in to investigate a series of craters that have opened up on the edge of the city. As he and his team survey the subsiding area, another story is taking place in the same suburban landscape. A younger boy, also named Hao, spends long afternoons playing with friends and making mischief until one-by-one, his playmates start to disappear. As these parallel stories unfold, the connections between them proliferate and grow stranger.

With virtuosic assurance, Qiu employs distinct styles for each of the two narrative strands and unites them with a wry and wistful sense of humor. *Suburban Birds* is both a reflection on the slippery nature of memory as well as a comment on China's rapid urbanization that heralds the arrival of an exciting new voice. *In person: Mark Peranson*

118 min // China/Taiwan // 2018

Interview with Qiu Sheng by Daniel Eagan

The following interview was originally published by Filmmaker Magazine, April 4, 2019

Filmmaker: Let's talk first about why you and cinematographer Ranjun Xu decided to work in the Academy frame.

Qiu: For me, the widescreen format has become a compulsory way to attract people's attention. People are too absorbed in it. I want the relationship between the film and the audience to become looser. With this frame, viewers are free to just puzzle out all the pieces together.

Filmmaker: So the frame is a puzzle? Do you think viewers see the Academy frame differently?

Qiu: I think viewers see a little faster than in the widescreen format. I think widescreen is more like seeing something in the director's or someone else's vision. When it's 4:3 it's more like an object, like a postcard. I think it's a frame you can arrange in different orders.

Filmmaker: Can you explain how you approached shooting in two different time periods?

Qiu: We had some rules. The camera doesn't move in the adult sequences, except once when they are in a different time space. We can pan and zoom, but not track.

Filmmaker: How do you collaborate with Ranjun Xu? Who creates the compositions?

Qiu: He had a lot of freedom during the adult sequences. I would tell him what to pay attention to before the shot starts, like who's the core of this scene and which action is important. He chose when to zoom into it. Also, I didn't let him listen to the dialogue. So most of the scenes he was shooting, he didn't know what they're talking about. He just observed from a distance. He was a bit lost at first.

Filmmaker: There's another shot when the surveyors are drinking beer at an outdoor restaurant at the end of the day. You put the camera pretty far away from them, so the DP has to zoom in and pan back and forth among the speakers.

Qiu: I wanted a wide frame to show the entire restaurant and the overpass above it. But the DP had read the script—he had an idea what’s happening, he just didn’t know in any one take what they’re saying. Sometimes he would pan because a character hands something to someone else, a glass of beer or something. By doing that I think the camera’s viewpoint will be a little bit different from the director’s viewpoint. There’s a distance between the drama and the camera’s movements.

Filmmaker: How does that help?

Qiu: Because for the adults’ section I wanted to create a sense of alienation. In the adult section, the camera is like a piece of surveying equipment observing characters.

Filmmaker: The sequences in the past feature about a half-dozen child actors. Can you talk about how you worked with them?

Qiu: Most of the child actors were nonprofessionals. Only Shuo Xu, who played Fang Ting, had worked in some TV series. Actually, she’s very popular and has a lot of fans. I picked the kids from school, about 20 to 30 of them. Before we started shooting in the summer we did a workshop for six weeks. We did acting exercises and also let them play with each other and develop relationships that ended up close to what’s in the film. It’s very hard working with children, but if you get it right it’s amazing. Usually, I didn’t tell them directly to move faster or to be happy or something like that. I just changed the props, changed the settings, changed the rules.

When we first shot the gunfight scene, we give them fake guns. But they couldn’t act at all. They didn’t believe it. So then I gave them “real” guns, one that fired soft pellets. We set up a rule that when someone’s shot, he’s dead, and when someone touches him he will be alive again. That helped make the scene work. Generally, we didn’t rehearse scenes like the gunfight or when they’re walking or playing. We did rehearse some scenes, like when they are lying on the ground talking about who likes who.

Filmmaker: Did shooting the children first affect how you shot the adult section?

Qiu: There are certain links between the child characters and adults. Xia Hao is the only one who knows what the past is, but I would give specific instructions to the other actors so they will be more similar to the children. Actually, the script changed a lot. Every two or three days I rewrote scenes, some of which we didn’t shoot. We still ended up with a lot of extra scenes, some of which I used. So the final film is way different from the script, both in structure and especially the ending. I rewrote scenes, some of which we didn’t shoot. We still ended up with a lot of extra scenes, some of which I used. So the final film is way different from the script, both in structure and especially the ending.

Filmmaker: What changed in the editing?

Qiu: Well, the first cut was about 3:10 long. I asked some friends to watch it and they were beaten by it. It was so messy. They couldn’t get a clue. But they did point out things that were working, things that didn’t. I did the first cut with my assistant director and then we hired a professional editor. And I got important advice from a scout for Directors’ Fortnight in Cannes. In the early cuts, I shifted between the present and the past several times. He said I should

only cut once. I went back and looked—that's the way I had it in my first two drafts of the script.

Filmmaker: Are you still editing?

Qiu: This will be the final version if the authorities have no objections.

Filmmaker: Can you say what they objected to?

Qiu: We handed in a version which had the children smoking cigarettes. There were shots of them playing in an arcade, shots of Xia Hao and Foxy hugging, and a scene where the children are singing a Communist song. So they gave us notes telling us clearly what had to be taken away. For the hugging shots, they told me to remove them completely, but I kept a couple of seconds in, which they accepted. So I got what is called the "dragon seal" from the censorship board. But you also need a screening permit or release certificate before the film can be shown in theaters domestically. And now we are being told that we need the release certificate before the film can be shown anywhere, including overseas and in festivals.

To get the certificate you have to hand in a list of all your crew and cast members, your producers, your distributors. Before they usually wouldn't ask to change the content at this stage, but there's a new law enacted this year that is stricter. So for example, Zhang Yimou's *One Second* was canceled at the Berlinale.

So theoretically, I could show *Suburban Birds* here. The authorities didn't say no, but they didn't say yes until Wednesday. If they had objected, they might have imposed a penalty. For me, that would be around \$50,000 and a five-year ban from working in film and television in China. They would also cancel the production company's certificate for making films.

Filmmaker: So this is a terrible risk not just for you but for the entire company.

Qiu: It's quite dangerous. It's very bad news for filmmakers. ♦

Coming Soon to Acropolis:

- Grass* (Hong Sangsoo, 2018)—April 24 at the Downtown Independent
- The Ethnopoetic Cinema of Sky Hopinka—May 2 at LACMA (Bing Theater)
- The Owl's Legacy* (Chris Marker, 1989)—May 31-June 2 at Ahrya Fine Arts



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