

All that changes with *Ripples of Life*: Wei's second two hour-plus feature in as many years shares a lot of the industry-centric subject matter as his first, but it also more decisively differentiates its own ambitions from those of the director's (still apparent) influences. The result impresses both as a vital piece of social commentary and a formidably executed feat of high-concept filmmaking. One strong example of Wei's improvement is found in the clever construction of the film's narrative, which sheds the slacker ethos that guided *Striding Into the Wind* together with its wayward Wei surrogate, shifting its focus among three main characters instead, each confined to distinct and largely non-overlapping storylines as they come to grips with their own respective 'roles' on the set of a film—itsself titled *Ripples of Life*—over the course of a few days on location in a small town, just prior to the start of production.

The first narrative follows Xiao Gu (Huang Miyi), a restaurateur and native resident of the town in which the film-within-a-film is set to shoot whose diligent catering to the crew gradually earns her a place in front of the cameras — an opportunity far outside the boundaries of her simple homelife. The second story revolves around this meta-*Ripples of Life*'s lead actress, Chen Chen (Yang Zishan), arriving by escort from the city but actually a native of the town; she left to pursue her career and, now that she's returned, seeks to reconnect with old friends, only to find that those relationships are now mired in the kinds of expectations that are generated by her newfound fame. Finally, for the most rewarding section of Wei's film, we hunker down with the film-within-a-film's director (Liu Yang) and its screenwriter (Kang Chunlei, who is also the actual screenwriter of Wei's film) for an extended verbal sparring match that encompasses filmmaking ethics and the struggle for artistic integrity, as well as both the self-serving pretensions and commercial compromises that can frequently serve as pitfalls of independent filmmaking.

This concluding section of *Ripples of Life* is not only the best stretch of the film; it also serves to reframe the previous two parts and expands the scope of what Wei is going for here: not just a meta-commentary on, or acerbic satire of, the Chinese filmmaking industry, but a more stinging addressing of the realities of social (im)mobility, with the partitioning of 'roles' on a film as analogue for particular disparities of class. That might seem a little too on the nose, but its last few sequences push things further, acknowledging the ultimate insignificance of its own micro-focuses as it deliberately broadens out beyond the scope of its film-centric narrative, referencing a specific real-life event that, indeed, extends even beyond the borders of China itself. A final montage returns us to each of the main characters, glimpsed in their more intimate moments outside the film production's narrative, all leading up to the first day of filming. The crew smiles for a group photograph, and Wei cuts to black — a final suggestion that the importance of film lies less in experiencing the work itself than feeling its reverberations, the opportunities it provides to reflect on the meaning in our own lives. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

A film crew arrives in remote town Yong'an. The fresh air they bring in spreads ripples in the heart of Gu, the owner of a local restaurant. She dreams of another life. Movie star Chen is back in her hometown; she expects to revisit her childhood friends and good old days. An endless debate persists between the director and the writer, revolving from cinema to life. Shooting must start, although consensus is never reached. *Co-presented by the Alula Film Festival.*

TRT: 123 min

In person: Wei Shujun

Ripples of Life by John Berra

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Swiftly delivering on the promise of his freewheeling, semi-autobiographical debut feature *Striding Into the Wind* (2020), director Wei Shujun returns with *Ripples of Life*, a dexterous rumination on the pursuit of authenticity. Divided into three chapters, it revolves around the production of a highbrow film in a remote town and courts comparison with the meta-comedies of Hong Sang-soo to the extent that one character is even complimented on her resemblance to the South Korea auteur's muse Kim Min-hee. Regardless of his openly acknowledged art-house influences, Wei is very much developing his own idiosyncratic sensibility. *Ripples of Life* sees the fledgling auteur continuing to draw candidly on his own immediate experiences while questioning the role of cinema in an increasingly fragmented Chinese society.

Premiering in the Director's Fortnight at Cannes, *Ripples of Life* looks set to make waves as the kind of cineaste's delight which goes down a treat on the festival circuit. Although films about filmmaking usually have niche appeal, international specialty sales could prove fruitful since Wei offers a particularly inspired deconstruction of the solemn regional portraits which have become a staple of Chinese independent cinema.

The first chapter observes the pre-production process from the perspective of bored waitress Xiao Gu (Huang Miyi), who regularly serves the team at her in-laws' restaurant and begins dreaming about a more glamorous life. Gu attracts the attention of the making-of director (Yang Pingdao) and is delighted to bag a minor role in the film, but is brought back down to reality when the star arrives on location.

In the second chapter, actress Chen Chen (Yang Zishan) receives a warm welcome from the community, as she grew up in the town before leaving to pursue a bright future in the dramatic arts. Although eager to reconnect with old friends, Chen finds that they either want to exploit her fame for publicity purposes or lifestyle differences are impossible to overcome, leaving her wondering if one can ever truly 'return home'.

The third chapter focuses on the project's embattled creative nexus with a director (Liu Yang) emboldened by critical success pushing an insecure screenwriter (the film's actual screenwriter, Kang Chunlei) to complete the final draft as the start date looms. It's essentially a two-hander

which pits the director's proclamations of aesthetic brilliance against the screenwriter's more earnest manner as they disagree on every aspect of the material from story to theme.

Structurally, the film flows smoothly from capturing mundane everyday existence, to evoking nostalgia to depicting a flailing attempt to capture its very essence. Parallel lives are presented in the first and second chapters. Gu's mundane responsibilities (shopping at the wholesale market, recommending dishes from the menu, nursing her baby) and naïve fantasies of stardom are pointedly contrasted with Chen's realisation that being the "pride of her hometown" will deny her slipping back into easy interactions with old classmates, despite her apparent humility.

If these chapters are characterised by canny observation, the third is infinitely more voluble in its meta commentary with Wei launching into a self-reflexive takedown of artistic pretensions (the film-within-a-film is also titled "Ripples of Life"). In dramatising the process of making a certain type of Chinese cinema – the director here aspires to make a "Checkovian tragedy" in a place where "time is frozen" – Wei satirically notes how rural areas and the lives of their residents have been aestheticized by filmmakers seeking credibility.

These shifts in tone are subtly navigated within the consistent visual framework afforded by Wang Jiehong's elegant cinematography and Matthieu Laclau's typically precise editing. Wei favours wide shots but discreetly modifies his style from the static compositions of *Striding Into the Wind* with steady pans and tracking shots to cover the circus that ensues when a film crew sets-up in a small town. This also gives his actors room to play scenes in revealing long takes. Perfectly cast as striking counterparts, relative newcomer Huang has moments of natural poignancy while Yang adroitly riffs on her star image as an actress entering a new stage of her career. Also playing opposites, Liu and Kang throw themselves into a heated interplay which swings so wildly from camaraderie to resentment that it's a blessed relief when the shock of an international news event transcends their artist bottleneck.

Whatever creative differences they may have experienced, Wei and his screenwriter certainly enjoyed a more productive collaboration than their exasperated alter-egos as *Ripples of Life* is an exceptionally accomplished sophomore feature.

Ripples of Life by Sam C. Mac

The following article was originally published by InReviewOnline, July 20, 2021

What's more hip than mimicking the particular, diffuse, long-take formalism favored by many of the most acclaimed filmmakers in Asia today? How about having your characters (all film students, filmmakers, and hangers-on name-checking Hou Hsiao-hsien and, foolishly given the specific context, Hong Sang-soo) come off like pretentious hacks, thereby signifying self-awareness and even self-deprecation embedded in what has been billed as a loosely autobiographical film? Such seemed to be the stratagem that new generation Chinese director Wei Shujun utilized for his first feature debut, last year's *Striding Into the Wind*—and so for all its insight into the soul-deadening, glad-handing, hierarchical rigidity of Chinese independent filmmaking, it became hard to shake off the feeling that Wei's slack pacing and reliance on compositionally generic master shots weren't merely an earnest bit of posturing, especially as this aesthetic tends to sap the dynamism out of some of his more sharply written scenes.