

After *DWELLING IN THE FUCHUN MOUNTAINS*



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THE FIRST TASTE OF LONELINESS



A film by GU YOU



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A FILM BY GU YOU

With

ZHOU XUN XI MEIJUAN WANG SHENGDI

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SYNOPSIS

After the death of a beloved father, three generations of women confront loneliness for the first time. Through farewells, the film explores the cycles of life across love, death, and healing.



INTERVIEW WITH GU YOU

► **This film is filled with nostalgia and deeply shaped by memories. At the same time, it depicts today's China. In what ways is your film so contemporary ?**

A widow starting a new relationship in her old age is still seen to this day as a big ethical dilemma for many Chinese families. A lot of children have severed ties with their parents because their parents have remarried or started new relationships later on in life. But there are also children who are open about it and encourage a lonely parent to find a new partner. Different ethical values regarding love also impact the society we live in. The difference here is that unlike in my earlier film, *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, where the characters are played by non-professional actors, the actors in this film, including Zhou Xun, are famous actors. One of the biggest challenges of making this film

was for them to remain unnoticed in crowded spaces.

► **Did you draw on memories of your youth, as you did for your previous films ?**

The making of this film had a lot to do with my father-in-law. Not long after I met my wife, her father was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. He passed away a year after we got married. I didn't get a chance to see him much and I was unable to establish a close relationship with him. After my father-in-law died, my wife often talked about how much he had loved her and about all the things they had been through as she was growing up. She took a long time to come to terms with his death and that's where the idea for this film came about.

► **The film portrays three women from three different generations in contemporary**

China. Why did you want to focus on female characters ?

When I was a teenager I once heard a song by Teresa Teng called *“The First Taste of Loneliness”*. It wasn’t one of her more popular songs but the lyrics were quite interesting. The first lines go: *“The wind came over and asked me: What is loneliness? You are still young. What do you know about loneliness?”* I realized that Teresa Teng wasn’t just singing about the kind of loneliness you feel when you’re in love. She was also talking about a deeper sort of loneliness you feel in life. And when my wife’s father passed away, I gradually started to feel that deeper sense of loneliness from the side lines. As Heidegger once said: *“Live toward death”*. Loneliness is something all of us will regularly experience in our lives. And because it unfolds at different depths, it offers different opportunities for an awakening to life. That’s how I got the idea of recreating these important moments of solitude through three generations of women. They reflect the course of a person’s life. The Buddhist saying goes: *“Affliction is itself enlightenment”*. In this film the mantra is: *“Loneliness is itself enlightenment”*. Loneliness is not something to be eradicated. It is the gateway to an awakening.

► What role do actors play in your understanding of what cinema can offer an audience ?

In China, people say the ultimate meaning

of art is *“to convey the Way (a deeper truth)”*. One of the reasons I first got into filmmaking was because film is still the most universal of art forms. We often hear clichés like *“live in the moment”*. Watching Capra’s 130-minute-long film *It’s a Wonderful Life* or Kurosawa’s 140-minute-long *Ikiru (To Live)* is like watching simulations of life that don’t require too much cultural background to understand. Two hours into films like that and we develop a completely different understanding of what it is to *“live in the moment”*.

► What role does Chinese culture play in the way the film approaches questions of life and death ?

All peoples turn to spiritual beliefs when it comes to life and death. Sometimes that takes the form of religion, sometimes it can be totems, and sometimes it can be traditional culture or philosophy from the past. And Chinese culture is no exception. The death of Yue’s father naturally prompts her to reflect on life and death and to engage in self-examination. That self-examination includes elements of Zen Buddhism, Taoism, Confucianism etc... And they come together within a broader culture.

► The title of your first film, *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains*, even took its title from the famous painting by Huang Gongwang, created more than six centuries ago. You pay

very close attention to the visual language of the film, with long takes, extended tracking shots and magnificent landscapes. Is painting a genuine source of inspiration for you, as it was with your first film ?

At the moment, yes. That’s why I conceived the so-called *“Chinese Landscape Painting (Shanshui)”* series of films - not as a continuation of the story from one film to the next, but as an ongoing exploration of how the language of landscape painting can be translated into the language of cinema. Just as the language of cinema is reinvented in every era, every culture and people will try to find a new cinematic grammar. In this third film in the series, I wanted to explore the limits of the grammar of Chinese landscape paintings. The cinematographer and I set down six ground rules at the start. *“One scroll; one shot”*: each shot is conceived like a scene in a painting, and we tried, to the best of our ability, to choreograph multiple scenes within a single shot. Precisely because the grammar of cinema has become so familiar to us, and also within the context of the emergence of AI, I hope to use these constraints to discover new possibilities within the language of film. Of course, ultimately, our decision to use this kind of language does not come from a need for formal experimentation, but from something deeper, on a philosophical and emotional level. This is a story about a father’s spirit after his passing, watching

over his family for 100 days before finally saying goodbye.

► You chose to set this film in the same region as your previous films, in southwestern China. Why was it important for you to keep that geographical continuity ?

Landscape painting is not just about landscape in Chinese culture, it embodies a whole world view. Just as in the West you talk about *“God”*, in the East we talk about Lao Tzu’s *“Tao”* (*“The Way”*). I hope that by bringing these things onto the screen through film, I can continue to understand, discover and capture the law that governs the fate of all things. The setting of the film is in Hangzhou in East China. Hangzhou is a city that embodies the landscapes of Chinese Landscape Painting because it contains both hills and lakes (*the Chinese word for “landscape painting” is “hills and water paintings”*). The West Lake in Hangzhou and the Fuchun River are like a huge park in the city and there are hills all around the city that people climb up all the time. The city of Hangzhou is also the setting for lots of fascinating classic novels, including the very famous love stories, *“The Legend of the White Snake”* and *“The Butterfly Lovers”*. These stories have given me the passion to continue to make films.

► What role does water play in your film and what does it symbolize ?

There is a line from a Song dynasty poem in the film: *"A thousand rivers hold a thousand moons"*. That is the origin of the names of the three female characters in the film and also the overarching theme of the film. In Zen Buddhist culture, the ultimate truth of life is likened to the moon in the sky - eternal, unchanging, and complete. All the material pursuits we have in our lives, such as career, family and love, are like the moon's reflections in different rivers. The ultimate purpose of pursuing those goals is to lead us to look up and see the real moon and make us not get absorbed by the moon that is reflected in the water. For example, in this film, Yue tries to fulfil her father's wish list for him. But those wishes were probably just her father's illusions. The most important thing is for her to get an insight into the true meaning of life as she tries to fulfil his wishes.

► **There is another space in the film that, much like nature, seems to take on a presence of its own, almost becoming a character in itself : the mother's apartment. You give this space a very particular identity. Why was it so important to you ?**

As you mentioned, the apartment embodies a lot of the emotional baggage of the characters. It becomes an external manifestation of the father who has passed away, as well as a vessel for the memories shared by the entire family. This is the story

of a family that is slowly falling apart. As the story comes to an end, the family home is empty and the family members have left. At this moment, the audience is left behind. Or perhaps what is left behind is the father's soul. Apart from the loneliness the three female characters feel, at the end of the film we might get a sense of the loneliness of the deceased father's soul. I hope that audiences can get a sense of the loneliness each of them carries inside them and get an insight into the meaning of happiness.

► **When you watch the film again today, what does it bring back for you ? What feelings or memories does it evoke ?**

Without my wife, this film would never have been made. I would like to dedicate this film to her and her family. ■

Translated by Miguel Fialho







CAST

JIANG Yue **ZHOU XUN**
GUI Zhi **XI MEIJUAN**
MU En **WANG SHENGDI**
YUN Tian **ZHOU YIWEI**
Xiaole **MU ZHICHENG**
Laoxu **XU CHAOYING**

CREW

Director **GU YOU** • Executive producer **DU KEXIN** • Producer **SHAN ZUOLONG**,
DU KEXIN • Script **YANG YIKUN**, **GU YOU** • Cinematographer **TAKIMOTO MIKIYA**
• Sound **LI DANFENG** • Production Design **ZHOU XINGYU** • Editor **LIU XINZHU** •
Production **HANGZHOU SHANSHUI FILMS (China)** • Coproduction **TANDEM FILMS**
(France) • French distribution **TANDEM FILMS** • International sales **LOSANGE FILMS**





GU YOU

Creating the “Shanshui Films” Series, Gu You’s debut feature, ***Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains***, was selected for the Critics’ Week section of the Cannes International Film Festival in 2019, becoming the first Chinese-language film to close the section. In 2020, the film was named one of the year’s Top Ten Films by both Cahiers du Cinéma (*France*) and Kinema Junpo (*Japan*). His second feature, ***Dwelling by the West Lake***, continued his aesthetic exploration and was selected for the Main Competition of the Tokyo International Film Festival in 2023. Gu You was honored with the Kurosawa Akira Award, standing as the youngest recipient in the award’s history. It went on to serve as the opening film of the 2024 Beijing International Film Festival. ■



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