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4b. The Making of a “Beillywood” Movie --- A Review of Chen Kaige’s Movie “Together (*He ni zai yiqi*)”

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(Duan WU)

During the 1980s, my introduction to melodramas infused with classic music started with a Japanese TV series called “The Heroic Polonaise.” It was about a talented pianist’s struggle with perfecting Chopin’s Heroic Polonaise for pianoforte in A flat major, Opus 53. In nearly each episode, the frustrated yet determined pianist starts pounding the keyboard and Chopin’s Polonaise forces through a torrent of uncertain notes and unyielding ray of optimism. Yet, the pianist never quite finishes the piece, until, if I recall correctly, the very last episode. As musically inept as I am, I can still recall, some fifteen years later, that maddened pianist playing that first minute of Chopin. To me, the pianist has simply personified the Heroic Polonaise.

This Chen Kaige fails to achieve in his most recent movie, “Together (*He ni zai yiqi*).” Merely an hour after watching “Together,” the remarkable tunes played brilliantly by the movie’s young violin prodigy, Liu Xiaochun (Tang Yun), started to fade. The movie boasts an impressive soundtrack, a gallery of symbolic images, and a handful of interesting characters, but lacks the discipline to weave all the elements into a coherent theme.

“Together” remains directionless through much of its two-hour span as what eventually resurfaces as the central thread of the story gets dropped again and again in plots that later turn out to be of little meaning. In other words, Chen Kaige fails, as a director, to subject the myriad of characters, images, and tunes to the service of his theme, as he appears undecided as to whether he wants to make a social satire or a family drama throughout most of the movie. His movie also comes off as ornate and excessive, as he stages many scenes with sounds and images purely for aural and visual effects. The result is a hodgepodge of characters living in Beijing where, instead of spontaneously breaking into a flashy dance as in Bollywood movies, they are perennially greeted with soaring violin sonatas punctuated by soothing Chinese classics. Shall we call this the “Beillywood” style?

“Together” unfolds as Liu Cheng (Liu Peiqi) and Xiaochun, father and son, venture into Beijing. A single father and a cook, it is clear from the beginning that Cheng is not your everyday peasant. Determined to make Xiaochun a star violinist, Cheng, an illiterate, doggedly creates and pursues means to advance his son’s music career. He first persuades Professor Jiang (Wang Zhiwen) at the Youth Palace to teach Xiaochun. And after witnessing the stardom achieved by an ex-student of Professor Yu’s (Chen Kaige), he forces Xiaochun to switch to study under Professor Yu.

Xiaochun, meanwhile, is busy growing up as a teenage. He befriends a pretty girl Lili (Chen Hong) who lives in the neighborhood. Xiaochun, who grew up without a mother or any sibling, gets attached to Lili. Together, the two of them experience the city and the emotional rides it offers.

Under Professor Yu’s wings, Xiaochun starts a rigorous training program in order to get selected for an international competition. To sever Xiaochun’s attachment to Cheng, Professor Yu exposes a secret surrounding Xiaochun’s birth, and asks Cheng to leave the city. Seeing that his work is completed, Cheng gathers his meager possessions and heads back to his hometown on the eve of the international competition, which leads to a final scene at the train station where Xiaochun reunites with Cheng.

Sounds like a promising script? Unfortunately, Chen Kaige fails to fully develop the central characters, Cheng and Xiaochun, after spending too much celluloid space on supporting characters, Professor Jiang, Lili and Professor Yu. Judging from the title and the ending, “Together” ultimately bets its money on delivering emotional punches through its depiction of the love and devotion between a father and a son that are untainted by self-interest or politics. But we see no clear sign of this theme until the end. The main conflict, created when Professor Yu turns into a villain, would have confirmed the theme, but it comes up too late in this movie. Moreover, the selected theme appears unrelated to other plots and characters that run half of the picture.

Specifically, after Cheng and Xiaochun have arrived in Beijing, they start to operate in separate circles. When Cheng is trying to engage Professor Jiang, Xiaochun wanders off. And once Professor Jiang starts teaching Xiaochun, Cheng is out of the picture. Similar things happen with regard to Professor Yu. And Xiaochun’s interaction with Lili is also largely void of Cheng. As a result, there are few scenes in Beijing that involve both Xiaochun and Cheng until the very end.

A good portion of the movie is instead devoted to three supporting characters: Professor Jiang, Lili, and Professor Yu. Chen Kaige’s interest in making social commentaries through these characters apparently overtakes his sense of obligation to his storyline. After all, a cynic, a whore, and a hypocrite, provide interesting opportunities to elbow the kind of commercialization frenzy that has seized the soul of a country. This begs the following questions: if Cheng Kaige had chosen social criticism as his theme and makes a satire, would he have produced a more memorable movie? Alternatively, if he had fully utilized Liu Cheng as a counterpoint to those three characters, and had made his movie more about Chinese peasants than about fathers, would it have been a more powerful movie? To Chen Kaige’s credit, he attempts at all these to some extent, such as turning Professor Yu, a prominent musician and a father figure to the musically gifted, into the villain that tries to deny Cheng his fatherhood. But Chen Kaige fails to follow through. He gives Professor Jiang a complete makeover for no apparent reason. He does not press to find out how Lili is paying her debt incurred by the gift episode. Even with the villain Professor Yu, Chen Kaige fails to bait us with a reason to devil-worship or to at least sympathize with him.

Instead, Chen Kaige “kills” off these three characters in a hurry, and reverts back to Xiaochun and Cheng. Because Chen Kaige fails to adequately use these three characters to develop the roles of Xiaochun and Cheng, the final emotional outbreak between the two appears abrupt and forgettable. The firepower of the final scene comes, in large part, from the soundtrack.

As a result of Chen Kaige’s directorial indecision, in more than half of the movie, Xiaochun’s role appears to be devised for the convenience of flushing out the depth of those three “supporting” characters’ existence. A byproduct of serving as the plot-pusher is that Xiaochun’s own personalities get compromised, which scars his character with arbitrariness and inconsistency.

A classic example of Xiaochun serving as the plot-pusher is as follows: after discovering a yellowed photograph at Professor Jiang’s residence, Xiaochun sets up an empty photo frame on top of the piano to segue into a monolog by Professor Jiang on his lost love. And to further push Professor Jiang’s story forward, Xiaochun, always the respectful student, is shown to slump in a chair cross-legged and to lecture Professor Jiang on life – and covers all, from romance to personal hygiene.

Yet that cocksure and love-savvy wisecracker is nowhere to be found in Lili's story. The Xiaochun that Lili knows is soft-spoken, uncertain, and green, who once asks Lili if he appears "provincial (*tu*)." If Xiaochun is half as street-smart and self-assured as he is with Professor Jiang, it shouldn't take much for him to see through Lili's makeup – she is but a call girl whose world is emptier than her apartment.

The acting does not help the role of Xiaochun. Tang may be a real-life prodigy in playing the violin, but he barely knows how to use body language and facial expression to act. Throughout the film, he is either spotted with a goofy smile, mostly when he stares at Lili, or a tearful face.

Where contradictory personalities and weak performance plague the portrayal of Liu Xiaochun, Liu Cheng's character is not a complete loss. Played convincingly by Liu Peiqi, Cheng resonates with millions of Chinese parents who devote themselves to their children's education. And if we view Xiaochun's music talent as a capital, then Cheng represents a self-taught entrepreneur that has become the force behind China's economic advance. With the innate business acumen and sound judgment that belong to a veteran of sales and marketing, Cheng opens one door after another for Xiaochun in a city forbidding to rural emigrants. Cheng does his research through a reliable source: other people's small talks in the washroom. That is how he decides who is going to teach Xiaochun. Cheng also knows how to capitalize on the apparent void in city-folks' hardened lives by offering Professor Yu and his wife some emotional salvation in the secret on Xiaochun's birth, which works to persuade Yu to try Xiaochun out.

Moreover, Cheng is a selfless hero that can be likened to dying dinosaurs in China nowadays. One of the most memorable images in the movie is a younger Cheng at a chaotic train station with a baby in his arms, frantically trying to find out who has left the baby behind. Topping Cheng's flimsy cry for the trafficking crowd's attention is the loudspeaker announcing the increasingly imminent train departures. The train of commercialization is leaving the station, should Cheng catch his train or stay with the baby in his arms? Through Cheng, "Together" tries to pay tribute to the creativity, intelligence, and self-sacrifice of China's peasants and casts a sympathetic eye towards their hardship. It is a real pity that "Together" strays away from this objective through a good portion of the movie, and only comes back to it towards the end.

Among the supporting roles, Lili is a character with great potential. A phenomenon of contemporary China, Lili is a young woman who dates men for a living. Yet she dreams of old-fashioned romance. "Together" shows that her so-called modern life not only can serve as a counterpoint for the more traditional life of those around Xiaochun, but also can highlight the commonality between herself and Xiaochun. However, in this respect, "Together" pales in comparison to "Beijing Bicycle," a 2002 production directed by Wang Xiaoshuai, where a rural laborer in Beijing also develops an infatuation over a "city-girl" of eye-candy beauty. Instead of losing Lili to the "call-girl-with-a-heart-of-gold" cliché, "Together" should have made her a more credible character that adds emotional complexities to Xiaochun's character, and not just a lipstick mark.

Another major flaw of the movie is the ornateness in its staging, especially when the staging seems meaningless other than to showboat the exoticness of China's cultural riches. The movie starts with scenes in an idyllic Jiangnan town where Xiaochun has purportedly grown up. The town "happens" to have an antiquated, southern, wooden house reminiscent of a 1920s whorehouse and laden with hand-carved motifs. We are also treated to gratuitous shots of Cheng and Xiaochun embarking their journey to Beijing by maneuvering their way through a tortuous inner-city waterway in a paddle-boat, an activity long since monopolized by tourists. It is certainly pretty to look at, but other than benefiting those who are interested in sightseeing China,

setting the first five minutes of the movie in Jiangnan barely seems relevant to the movie itself. There appears to be no significance, for plot or character development, that Xiaochun grew up in Jiangnan.

Chen Kaige's staging is not limited to geography, but time periods as well. His too liberal collage of clashing symbols from different periods of Chinese history could make the movie a hard sell among a Chinese audience. For instance, his use of a town-wide loudspeaker system in Xiaochun's hometown to broadcast local news is probably aimed at eliciting images of the Mao-era. However, it backfires as an artificial prop in a movie meant to reflect contemporary China.

Despite the many drawbacks, there are merits of "Together" worth noting. The movie finely presents different views on musicianship by people from different walks of life, and makes salient points on these views. There is the peasant-turned-businessman who still uses musicians as ceremonial master and hires Xiaochun to "welcome" his newborn. There is the "violin-mom" who sends her son to violin lessons to get "cultured" while letting her own mannerisms belie her provincialism, as she sits in on the music class and fields calls on her cellular phone! And there is the successful violin prodigy who plays to a sold-out concert hall. You might think this is the highest level of musicianship to be sought after. Wrong again, because as Professor Yu tells us, it is all staged "for show (*zuo xiu*)," not for the good of music.

Using hairstyles, "Together" also cleverly ridicules us who judge other people's worth and status by their appearance. The movie begins with Xiaochun having his hair cut by an elderly barber -- a simple haircut with no sense of style whatsoever. Later, Xiaochun has another haircut, this time by Professor Yu. The second haircut is meant to be a politically correct haircut that is part of the preparation for the international competition -- not too stylish yet proper. But the point is, underneath the hair, there is the same Xiaochun with the same talent and vulnerability.

Lili and her boyfriend step into the movie as an attractive and self-centered couple truly into each other as Lili pours bottled water onto her boyfriend's well-groomed hair -- an act of intimacy that is, oddly, public. The act becomes more understandable as we learn more about Lili's frustration with her lack of public status with regard to men in her life.

And who is the master of hair-inspired illusion but Professor Yu? He spots an uneventful haircut throughout the movie except when he lectures, which makes the few threads of unkempt (hence, presumably artist-looking) hair stand out on his head. To convey an acerbic view of authority and fashion, Professor Yu's hairdo uncannily resembles that of a former student Yu was criticizing for commercializing art just nights before.

In sum, despite such finesse in dealing with details, Chen Kaige loses sight of the big picture, and lets his movie appear directionless. He also closes his movie in "Beililywood" style with a big-bang, all-happy ending. It is an ending packaged with an emotional climax that is designed to be a crowd pleaser. One can go home from this movie feeling triumphant, not because a true moment of humanity has been revealed, but simply because the underdog wins. Add your choice of car-chase, fistfight, and gun-battle, this one may just make the next top-ten list at your local video rental store.

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