
4c. Chen Kaige and the Passing of Generations: A Review of Movie "Together"

(Miguel SALAZAR)

Selling out is often considered as the sad finale of a great artistic career, the point in which the promising future of a talented young punk, all vital élan and impudent vision, becomes the nostalgic past of a burnt-out hack.

However, it is not necessary to consider this osteoporosis of creative spines a tragedy. "Selling out" may be understood as part of the natural passing of generations, creating the essential space for the new crop of young punks to prosper, and creating the essential Village Elders for them to rail against. It is in this light that determining the degree of Chen Kaige's selling-outness becomes important, beyond the fun to be had by snickering at somebody else's loss of youth and inner fire. "Together" provides both snickering opportunities aplenty, and many chances to consider the twilight of one of the most recognizable directors of the "Fifth Generation."

Coming from his disastrous attempt at directing in the West (the horrendous "Killing me Softly"), Chen comes back home to direct the kind of little moral fables that tend to appeal to societies undergoing extreme and rapid change. "Together" is a simple melodrama (loosely based on "a real story") about Liu Xiaochun, a violin prodigy (Tang Yun, a real life violin virtuoso) who travels to Beijing with his loving country-bumpkin father (Liu Peiqi) in order to find a master that will lead him to success. His determined father manages to get professor Jiang (Wang Zhiwen) to take him as a pupil. Xiaochun soon meets, develops a crush on, and befriends social butterfly Lili (Chen Hong), whose main occupation in life seems to be to keep a continuous flow of sugar daddies (in a cute touch, she keeps her Little Black Book on her mirror, written in lipstick). After some time training with professor Jiang, his father manages to get him accepted by the high-rolling professor Yu (Chen Kaige himself), who forces Xiaochun to choose between family and success, and between art for art's sake and art for marquee-placement's sake. Inevitable twists, revelations and emotional crises ensue, and you would need a heart of stone to avoid laughing out loud at the Moving Finale (paraphrasing Mark Twain).

Perhaps unable to decide whether to make this standard fable into a paean to paternal love, a study on the conflict between a pure artistic calling and the desire for career success, or an indictment of the shallow materialism of the modern Chinese urban elites, Chen simply piles in the clichés in a peculiarly disjointed narrative structure that feels as an excuse to laundry-list a large number of subjects *du jour* and tick 'em off as read (the spiritual emptiness of the newly affluent urbanites - check, the rampant corruption and exclusion of the new Chinese class system -check, the decadent joys of freshly squeezed orange juice -check).

The acting varies from the indifferent to the terrible. Tang Yun is especially wooden, unable to generate a single spark regardless as to whether he is playing against his dotting father, his sexy neighbor, his manipulative master or even his violin. Liu Peiqi is proficient in the standard role of spunky, crafty, overly deferential and comically out-of-water Peasant in the City. Wang Zhiwen plays well a stereotypically chain-smoking, tea-jar-wielding Chinese professor, so crumpled you can almost hear his very soul begging for a steam press. Chen Hong, the director's real-life wife, looks the part but does not seem to even try to convey any emotional complexity in what is potentially the most interesting character of the lot. Chen Kaige's own cold performance as an all-business, manipulative art-world playah would leave a better taste were it not for the nagging feeling that he shaped the whole plot so he and his wife could have something fun to do.

Overall, “Together” is a very competently crafted (the cinematography of Korean master Kim Hyung-ku is as excellent as usual), fairly standard-issue melodrama that would not look out of place as a made-for-TV Lifetime special. Treacly melodrama is a perfectly honorable genre, but tucking at heartstrings with devices as hackneyed and overwrought as those found in “Together” is not what we usually expect from a world-class director. It is thus very easy to conclude that with this, Chen Kaige has full and truly Sold Out.

This would be a somewhat hasty assessment. Positing a fall from grace assumes that the present-day Chen Kaige, melodrama-monger, is a very different creator not just from the young man that filmed the ground-breaking “Yellow Earth”, but from the man who directed such influential costume dramas as “Farewell my Concubine.” Surely this must be the case. “Yellow Earth” and “Farewell my Concubine” are both signature films of the Fifth Generation revolution that put post-opening China back in the cultural radars of the world. They are serious award-winning Films, and it follows they must have been fashioned by real Filmmakers.

But must they? The so-called Fifth Generation was a rather heterogeneous group, both in terms of artistic vision and in terms of artistic abilities. Chen Kaige ended up as the second most recognizable name of that crop not so much for his always middling skills as a director, but by his very successful apperception of the zeitgeist that gave the Fifth Generation its heightened profile. That “spirit of the time” was one of looking back in sorrow.

For Westerners, the appeal was clear. Revisiting the many physical and emotional hardships heaped upon China by an exceedingly unforgiving century provided endless opportunity for epic drama. Add the intense curiosity about the experience of life under Communism, especially now that the cold war was over, and the frisson of recognizing coded political critiques in almost every image and plot twist, and it is not hard to understand the sensation that this generation of intense, competent filmmakers, well versed on the idioms of Western artistic cinematography and esthetics, had on the Western art movie crowds of the late 80s and early 90s.

It is interesting to compare the impression that some of those 90s successes made on the Chinese educated urban middle-classes, who should ostensibly be the intended public of films of this kind. The most common reaction towards films such as Zhang Yimou’s “Raise the Red Lantern” and Chen’s “Tempress Moon” was and is to complain that they were “made for foreigners.” The bleak esthetics of character mortification, full of unforgiving harshness, uncomfortable psychological perversion and fairly unsympathetic characterization -the very hallmarks of what was appealing to foreign art-house audiences- were leaving an aftertaste of absurdity in urban Chinese mouths, a feeling of national misrepresentation and slightly offensive imagery.

This feeling of absurd pandering to foreign stereotypes created significant cognitive dissonance among Chinese audiences. Flatly denying the quality of internationally acclaimed films was problematic at a time when seeking international acclaim was becoming a national obsession. It became easier to attribute all perceived failings of those films to their conceited pseudo-foreign gaze (Butter-stench, as the Japanese call it), in essence shrugging their shoulders and saying “it must be good, it’s just not my thing”. Some of the Fifth Generation directors, Zhang Yimou in particular, recognized this duality in the market, and catered dual feasts, with films that were perceived to be real meat-and-sweet-potatoes films “for Chinese” (The Story of Qiu Ju, for example) in which the gaze fixes on the troubles and tribulations of modern rural life in quasi-Realist fashion, with a didactic and ultimately optimistic soul. “Together” is to a degree an unsuccessful attempt by Chen Kaige to replicate the trick.

On their side of the fence, Western audiences were willing to forgive quite a few rough spots on the basis of the credit line that tends to be extended to exotic pieces. It is easy to forgive clumsy characterization when there is already enough richness to be had from unfamiliar settings, customs and circumstances.

Chen Kaige may well have been the greatest beneficiary of this double Get-Out-of-Jail card. His intense early “This Century Sucked” melodramas secured him attention in the West and notoriety in the East, and the mystique of his personal Wounded Soul guaranteed him some leeway. There is hardly a review of his work in the West that fails to find a connection between a feature or another of one of his pieces and the trauma of having denounced his own father as a Red Guard (a terrible but unfortunately common experience for men of his generation).

However, watching again once well-received films such as “Life on a String”, it is easy to recognize the maudlin, stereotyped feel for human relations that has become apparent in later Chen Kaige films. Using a more technical language, Chen Kaige blew then as now. His failings as a director have become more apparent as years have diluted some of his passion, and his chosen themes have become ones that need more skill than brio. The weaknesses of his films are not the result of their being “made for foreigners”. They are more essential failings that were interpreted by both foreign observers and Chinese viewers as the result of *them the viewers* being out of tune with the code being used, of their not understanding features “lost in the translation”. They were not.

Chen Kaige’s plight, unable to move forward without exposing his weaknesses, unable to go back to a more forgiving past, is in a way the plight of the Fifth Generation, and this generational burn-out may be the good news for Chinese art alluded at above. The so-called Sixth Generation is successfully moving its targets to themes and styles that separate them and give them a sense of an art more attuned to the changes of present-day China. Directors such as Lou Ye and Wang Xiaoshuai are giving urban youth, the new class divides, and the harshness and joys of life in the coastal cities the attention they did not receive in the earlier period of the opening. Their films do not get anywhere near the exposure that Zhang or Chen achieved, but this is not a reflection on the quality of their work. Time changes, the spotlight moves. Circumstances and the chancy configuration of contingencies are more important in defining the impact of an artistic movement than any of its intrinsic achievements.

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