

SCREENING NOTES: DESTINY (喜禾)

Daniel Vuillermin

Institute for Medical Humanities, Peking University

Film title:

Destiny 喜禾

Credits:

Written and Directed by Zhang Wei 张唯

Photography by Yang Wei

Art Direction by Peng Shaoying

Editing by Manuel De Sousa, Wu Yixiang

Screenplay by Li Dan, Lele, Yang Haibo, Duan Tiantian, Wang Mancheng, Chen Jianzhong, Zhao Xu, Xue Mei

Music by Liu Tao

Sound by Zhen Hongmin, Gu Changning

Film Specifications:

Production Country: China

Year: 2016

Language: Mandarin Chinese

Genre: Drama

Subtitle Language: English

Running Time: 98 minutes

Colour/Bw: Colour

Aspect Ratio: 1:1.85

Frame Rate: 24

Sound Ratio: 5.1

Originally Shot on: Arri Alexa, location: Shenzhen

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Cast:

Liang Jingke as Tian Lin, mother of Xi He.

Liang Jingke graduated from Beijing Film Academy. She previously starred in popular TV series *A Beautiful Daughter-in-law Era* and *Before the Dawn* as well as in the films *Mount Dingjun*, *Kill Zone* and *New Shaolin Temple*.

Feng Jun as Xi He, a young boy with autism.

Feng Jun, a child actor, starred in the TV series *Family Feast* and *Life as a House* as well as in the films *Love Lifting* and *Drug War*.

Zhao Ju as Li Haibin, father of Xi He.

Zhao Ju graduated from the Central Academy of Drama and has played roles in the TV series such as *The Courtyard of Fan Family*, *Salvation* and *Enemy at the Gates* as well as in the films *Mao Zedong and Snow* and *Born in a Lighthouse Family*.

Huang Jingyi as Tian Gui, elder brother of Tian Lin

Huang Jingyi performed in the film *No Man's Land* directed by Ning Hao.

Director Biography (written by Zhang Wei)

Zhang Wei is an independent filmmaker devoted to representing the lives of marginalised social groups. With the capability to invest, he works as both a producer and a director. His films are known for the unconventional materials he draws from as well as his unique perspectives. Zhang Wei is talented in depicting the living conditions of China's marginalised social groups in a plain and natural documentary style. The films Zhang Wei directed are imbued with an intense and innate social awareness. Such spontaneous awareness makes every film of his a terrific topic for controversy. Underneath his seemingly plain narrative are often enormous social conflicts. From the constant conflicts between characters and the society, the audience see the most easily ignored things in the drastically changing Chinese society. Zhang Wei himself is a contradicted soul: he is hot-tempered and impatient as a person, yet his works illustrate his viewpoints lucidly and calmly, with a certain stubbornness but deep humanistic sentiments. Since 2010, the films produced by Zhang Wei, e.g. *Beijing Dream* (喜禾), *The Shadow Puppet Show of One Person* (一个人的皮影戏), *Factory Boss* (打工老板), and *Destiny* (喜禾), have gained attention from critics, and triggered widespread debates.

Filmography as Director

2016: 喜禾 English title: *Destiny*

2014: 打工老板 English title: *Factory Boss*

2011: 一个人的皮影戏 English title: *Shadow Puppet Show One Person*

2010: 喜禾 English title: *Beijing Dream*

Film Synopsis

Set in the southern city of Shenzhen, Zhang Wei's docudrama *Destiny* (2016) focuses on a mother's struggle to keep her autistic child, Xi He, at a "normal" primary school. Tian Lin, Xi He's mother, takes every opportunity she can to educate her son so that he can only comprehend the world around him but eventually live independently. Xi He's father, Zhao Ju, however, is content for his son to attend a "special" school and encourages Tian Lin to have a second child so that in the future Xi He will be cared for. After a series of incidents at the school a group of parents organise to have Xi He expelled. Tian Lin attempts to apologise and persuade other parents to sign a petition and while some show sympathy most of the parents dismiss her pleas. Though a consultation with a doctor reveals that Xi He shows signs of intellectual improvement and is capable of learning, the school struggles to have him reinstated. Finally Xi He and Tian Lin are forcefully rejected by a group of aggrieved parents. The film then shifts to a remote and impoverished village where the family visits Tian Lin's mother. There it is revealed that Tian Lin has an autistic elder brother, Tian Gui, who has escaped from his shackles. That evening the villagers round up Tian Gui and threaten to lock him permanently in a steel cage. Tian Lin's elderly mother struggles to care her son yet does not entrust others to take responsibility for him. Faced with the task of caring for two autistic family members, Tian Lin divulges that she was "born a slave" to attend to her brother following their parents death. The elderly mother states that it is her "fate", or destiny as the title of the film suggests, to care for her family. Tian Lin leaves behind her mother and brother and returns to Shenzhen where she takes on the role of a teacher to Xi He, not at a school, but on a subway platform. The mother and son attract the attention of the public and their story goes viral on social media, television, and newspapers prompting the local government to respond to Xi He's situation. A televised meeting between Tian Lin, the school headmaster, and government officials proceeds as each party debates the policies of integrated education and the challenges of balancing the rights of majority and minority groups. Tian Lin makes a plea for the public to understand, accept, and integrate people with autism into "normal" society, however, Xi He is not admitted back at the school. Finally, Tian Lin quits her job at the bank and assumes full responsibility for educating Xi He.

Commentary: “Children of the Stars” (星星的孩子)

Based on a true story, Zhang Wei’s docudrama *Destiny* represents the trials of educating an autistic child in China from two perspectives. The first is a portrayal of the individual needs of an autistic child, for which the mother assumes primary responsibility. The second is a critique of the standards and requirements of the mainstream or “normal” education system and how this competitive environment does not take into account the needs of disadvantaged students. In *Destiny*, education is presented as the only path to an independent life. Whereas American films such as *Rain Man* (directed by Barry Levinson, 1988) or more recently *Adam* (directed by Max Mayer, 2009) seek to represent an individual’s experience of autism, Chinese films such as *Breaking the Silence* (漂亮妈妈) (directed by Sun Zhou, 2000), and now *Destiny*, make use of disorders as a means of sociopolitical critique.

The protagonist, Tian Lin, represents an idealised image of motherhood as she tirelessly struggles for her child’s equal right to an education. In contrast, Xi He’s blue-collar father, Zhao Ju, is a passive figure who is content with the status quo, and urges his wife to cease her struggle to have their son accepted into mainstream society. Director Zhang Wei states that he sought to “express the topic of motherhood through the life experience of an autistic child ... as well as reflect the relationship between man and society from a humanistic care perspective”.

The style of the dialogue is direct and emotive. In preparing the script, director Zhang Wei pieced together parts of the dialogue from real-life accounts of an autistic student’s mother, other students’ parents, a school principal and teachers so as to portray an “authentic and reasonable story”. Like many so-called “sixth generation” social realist art films, which focus on contemporary marginal figures in a naturalistic documentary style, there is a strain of didacticism that runs through the film. Zhang Wei states, “I use 98 minutes to foretell the whole life of a 9-year-old autistic child. I am exploring a destiny inherited from genes. I am also trying hard to show the life struggles of a mother facing a desperate situation.”

Press Coverage

Zhang Wei Tackles the Sensitive Issue of Autism with Destiny (China, 2016)

by Karen Ma (VCinema)

<http://www.vcinemashow.com/zhang-wei-tackles-the-sensitive-issue-of-autism-with-destiny-china-2016/>

Divining Destiny

by Chen Mengwei (China Daily)

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2016-05/12/content_25233909.htm

張唯執導電影喜禾 從自閉症探討命運

Chinatimes

<http://www.chinatimes.com/realtimenews/20160504004669-260404>

他的世界你永远不懂 电影《喜禾》入围蒙特利尔国际电影节

Canada Septdays

<http://m.septdays.com/yw/2016/09-01/1190.shtml>

中国教育の現状... 自閉症の息子とその家族の未来とは by Nobuhiro Hosoki (Yahoo Japan)

<https://headlines.yahoo.co.jp/hl?a=20170324-00000031-flix-movi>

Review of DESTINY by H.N. Narahari Rao (FilmFocusIndia)

<http://filmfocusindia.com/e-cineindia-february-2017.html>

Destiny - Recensione

by Massimo Volpe (linkinmovies, Italy)

<http://www.linkinmovies.com/cinema/asia/7569-destiny-recensione>