
Berlinale
73 Internationale Filmfestspiele Berlin
Competition
XIN BAIQING
HUANG YAO
TIAN ZHUANGZHUANG
NAN JI
THE SHADOWLESS TOWER
A FILM BY
ZHANG LU
FILMS Boutique

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THE SHADOWLESS TOWER

A Film by
ZHANG LU

2023 - China - Drama - 1.85 - 144 min

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CREW

Written and Directed	Zhang Lu
Produced by	Shanghai Lu Films Co., Ltd.
In Co-Production with	Beijing Nanji Flim Co., Ltd.
Chief Producers	Zhang Jian, Han Mei
Chief Executive Producer	Jianxin Huang
Producers	Xu Jiahan, Peng Jin
Line Producers	Liu Wenli, Liu Jiaqi
Director of Photography	Piao Songri
Costume Designer	Bai Yun
Production Designer	Zheng Yican
Editor	Liu Xinzhu
Supervising Colorist	Fu Shu
Sound Designer	Wang Ran
Music Composer	Xiao He

CAST

Starring	Xin Baiqing Huang Yao Tian Zhuangzhuang
Co-Starring	Nan Ji Li Qinqin Wang Hongwei Wang Yiwen

SYNOPSIS

Gu Wentong, a middle-aged food critic, is drifting through the local eateries of vibrant Beijing with his younger photographer colleague Oyang. A divorcé with a 6-year-old daughter and estranged from his father for decades, he is looking for a new perspective on life while reconsidering his failings as a father, a son, and a lover.

While the seasons come and go, people get together and move apart. Only one thing will remain the same: The White Pagoda where they all meet sooner or later...

INTERVIEW WITH ZHANG LU (Questions: LI Xun)

Your previous works often portrayed strangers in a foreign land, but The Shadowless Tower is a film about Beijing locals. Is it partly based on your personal experience? What made you write about and shoot in Beijing this time?

Actually, I have lived in Beijing for the longest time; my family lives here, too. Gradually I have become familiar with the city, but no matter how familiar I am -- Beijing is not my hometown after all -- it often makes me feel like a stranger all of a sudden. Therefore, I'm always sensitive to the space I am in.

Meanwhile, what sticks in my mind is Beijing in the 80s and 90s. In 1967 or 1968, I came to Beijing for the first time and during my adolescence, I paid a few visits. In the 80s and 90s, I basically lived in Beijing, without any work, just living. At the time, I saw Beijing as some sort of an entity. As someone who lived here for a long time, left, and returned, I've realized that this entity is dissolving; it's not collapsing per se, but taking on different shapes.

Why did you choose the White Dagoba and its surrounding area?

I wanted to shoot in Beijing a long time ago, but back then I wasn't sure of what I wanted to convey; this uncertainty stayed with me even when I was filming The Shadowless Tower. In my youth, I often hung out near the White Dagoba and Xishiku ("Western General Warehouse"), so I was quite familiar that area. Before I made Yanagawa, a friend and I went to a coffee shop over there, where Gu Wentong (played by Xin Baiqing) and Ouyang Wenhui (played by Huang Yao) meet in the film. I discovered something different from my past impressions. Beijing's buildings and streets are rectangular and exact, strictly according to a spatial order. The White Dagoba breaks this rigid order, as it's circular and soaring upwards. In a city that reveals its power structure with gray as the dominant color and hints of vermilion, the white-colored Dagoba stands out, projecting an emotional power. Whenever I feel depressed, a look at the Dagoba gives me solace. After a couple visits, Ihave become very familiar with its looks throughout the day, in rain, snow, or sunshine, across different seasons. Therefore, I picked the Xicheng District as a foothold for my first shoot in Beijing.

In mid-September 2020, I was quarantined at a hotel in Guangzhou. During that time, I suddenly recalled the Huatian Yanji (Korean) cold noodles I had at Xisi ("Western Quadrangle"). It was not only a physical urge, but also a spiritual desire. I noticed that my feelings had changed. The urge to eat is vulgar, so I thought of other things to suppress it. The White Dagoba came to my mind. As I had nothing to do, I wrote the screenplay of The Shadowless Tower during the 14-day quarantine; I lumped together the impression Beijing left on me in my youth, the subconscious desire to shoot in Beijing over the years, the "locked-up" condition I was in, and the appetite for Yanji cold noodles in my writing.

The male protagonist Gu Wentong is an interesting figure. He seems to embody certain characteristics of middle-aged men in Chinese society -- following the crowd and opportunism. What's your opinion of the character?

At a certain point, not sure when, I became more interested in the emotional state of middle-aged men -- they see neither the past nor the future clearly -- the state of being-stuck-in-the-middle; both physically and emotionally, they cannot keep up. They could take a step forward, but they choose not to, since they're held back by many things in the past. In other words, it's a critical point, a most uncertain moment. What interests me most is their hesitation, their "out-of-sync-ness."

That's the case with Gu Wentong. In everything he does, he is afraid of hurting others, but if we dig deeper, we'd find that he's actually afraid of hurting himself. Although he no longer writes poems, a poet's sensitivity still remains, so he's a little bit awkward. The absence of his father, too, contributes to his personality. He lost his father when he was five years old. Generally speaking, when a boy grows up, he often imitates, intentionally or unintentionally, his father. A father's influence on his son is deeper than expected. When the boy is older, his father's friends will often say, "You're really like your dad." However, Gu Wentong doesn't have someone to imitate. In a sense, he is his father's shadow, but since five years old, he's lost his light source. As a result, he grew up in a rhythm different from his peers. He's interested in Ouyang exactly because he identities with her. I think the foundation of human relationships is empathy.

In the film, Gu Wentong is not a likable figure (i.e. his divorce) mainly because he's too "polite." When two people get too polite with each other, it means that their relationship is coming to an end. Could you talk about this "politeness"?

Actually it means the loss of passion. Even quarreling shows some kind of passion, but politeness means its complete loss. There's a mixture of love and hate in all romantic relationships (I'm not sure if I'm right). For people like Gu Wentong, his strong sensitivity

makes him foresee what's to come. Even going forward, he's ready to retreat; he never goes to the very end. In a sense, "politeness" also means indifference, while Gu Wentong doesn't want to turn his indifference into hate. When his ex-wife asks him if he cares about her cheating, he says he doesn't care; he's giving himself a way out to protect himself.

Let's talk about Ouyang Wenhui. Having been dumped by her boyfriend, she grows to like Gu Wentong, a middle-aged man who is quite attractive. It's also implied that there underlies another psychological root: Ouyang thinks that Gu Wentong resembles her father very much.

In the hotel room, Ouyang says, "You look like someone," without telling Gu Wentong who it is. Nanji later likens them to father and daughter. It only becomes clear in the chess-watching scene.

Ouyang's imagination of her father is baseless. She projects an idea of his father onto Gu Wentong. Why is she interested in a man of this age? Perhaps his father is of the same age. She's constantly drawn by such an idea. In fact, Gu Wentong is not talented, as you can learn from his sister's line, "No one can remember your dad's poems." He's not successful, either. It's his distinct rhythm that appeals to Ouyang. A person's talent,

social status, family background, and looks certainly matter, but in my opinion, usually one is attracted to those with the same rhythm. The two protagonists are in sync, but not always.

In terms of similarities, both of them lack something; neither had someone to imitate as they grew up. On the other hand, Gu Wentong keeps a lot of things inside. For a girl who is extroverted, or disguises herself as an extrovert, he is somewhat attractive.

Then let's move on to Gu Wentong's father, Gu Yunlai (played by Tian Zhuangzhuang). Compared with the relationship between the two protagonists, the father-son relationship is more mysterious.

As the story unfolds, Gu Yunlai, Gu Wentong, and Ouyang Wenhui form an important triangular relationship. It's not simply a father-son story, nor a romantic story. With Gu Yunlai, the film is given a firm structure. What does this character mean to you?

The father-son relationship is always a theme I want to explore. For people of my age, their fathers are very old or have passed away. I spent a lot of time on this character when I was writing the first draft in Guangzhou. Gu Wentong was born and raised in Beijing; he witnessed Beijing's transformation in the 70s, 80s, and 90s. He is a native of Beijing and has never left. Gu Yunlai was exiled in 1976. Although decades have passed, his heart remains in Beijing. Of course, his children are in Beijing. In short, the son stays, but the father is in exile.

In the process of developing the characters, an ancient Chinese saying came to my mind, "No one knows a man better than his father." For children, fathers are mysteries, while fathers can see through their sons' every move, every trick. The blood runs from his father, not vice versa. For any father and son -- those who love each other, hate each other, or just become distant like Gu Wentong and Gu Yunlai -- they will eventually get to understand each other and even reconcile.

In your films, it seems women are often stronger than men. They are more aggressive, more active, smarter, wiser, better at arguing. Is it intentional? Are you thinking about the concept of an ideal woman?

First, it comes from life. The women in my life -- my mother, my sisters, and my female friends -- I think they are all more resilient and generous than men. It's deeply rooted in my mind since I was a kid that women embody strength and kindness. On this matter, I'm also influenced by Cao Xueqin (author of Dream of the Red Chamber), who wrote,

“Women are made of water, men of mud.” The world has changed, but his observation remains sharp.

Men are usually not strong-willed, or they only pretend to be so. Gu Wentong doesn’t even pretend. If he is strong-willed, then his relationship with Ouyang could evolve; perhaps love will emerge. Love is a flame, but Gu Wentong always hides in a damp place, unwilling to be ignited. Nonetheless, Ouyang refuses to give in, so she takes him to the hotel. In a sense, Ouyang leads in this relationship and Gu Wentong just follows her, uneasily and passively.

In short, I really like Ouyang’s personality. When she realizes that Gu Wentong is weak and afraid to take a step forward, she lets it be. In addition, I don’t like the so-called pure virtues that we impose upon women. We have to consider these virtues with respect to specific environments, contexts, families, and characters. Women in my films, A-Chuan (in Yanagawa), So-dam (in Fukuoka), and Ouyang are all charming because they stay true to their own rhythms. I can’t appreciate the image of tolerant and reliable women in men’s minds. Men are not reliable. Why do they expect women to be reliable? Look at So-dam, Ouyang, and Liu Chuan. From a traditional perspective, they are actually not that reliable.

ZHANG LU

Zhang Lu was born in Yanbian, China in 1962. In 2004 he directed his first feature, Tang Poetry, which was selected for Locarno. He then began his career as a film director in both Chinese and Korean, making more than ten feature films. His next film, Grain in Ear (2005) won the Prix ACID-CCAS at Cannes Critics' Week. His feature films Dooman River, Desert Dream and Fukuoka premiered at Berlinale.

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

2023	THE SHADOWLESS TOWER
2021	YANAGAWA
2019	FUKUOKA
2018	ODE TO THE GOOSE
2016	A QUIET DREAM
2015	LOVE AND...
2014	GYEONGJU
2013	SCENERY
2010	DOORMAN RIVER
2008	IRI
2008	CHONGQING
2007	DESERT DREAM
2005	GRAIN IN EAR
2004	TANG POETRY
2001	ELEVEN

BAIQING XIN

Baiqing XIN graduated from the Central Academy of Drama with a bachelor's degree in acting performance in 1997. Today Xin is recognized as one of China's preeminent stage actors as well as a prolific presence in Chinese movies and TV series.

The Shadowless Tower marks his second collaboration with director Lu Zhang after Yanagawa (2021). Other notable films include A Lifelong Journey, Legend of the Demon Cat, Green Snake, The Yellow Storm, Happiness as Flowers, Spring Time in a Small Town and Turmoil.

Xin is the recipient of numerous awards, among them Best Actor in a Supporting Role in the 35th Golden Rooster Award for Yanagawa (2022), Best Actor in the 30th Shanghai Magnolia Stage Performance Award (2021), the 29th Plum Performance Award and the Actor of the Year in Stage Award by Modern Drama Valley (2019), all for his starring role in the play Gu Wenchang;

The Theatre Actor of the Year in the 8th BQ Shining Stars Ceremony by Beijing Youth Weekly and Best Actor in China Fashion Power Award for Green Snake (2013); Best Leading Actor in the 3rd Academy Award (Drama Performance) & National Drama Performance Exhibition for Green Snake (2013); The Golden Lion Award, China's most prestigious theatre award for Four Generations Under One Roof (2012).

SELECTED FILMOGRAPHY

2022 **THREE DECADES** by Tong Xu
2022 **THE SHADOWLESS TOWER** by Lu Zhang
2021 **YANAGAWA** by Lu Zhang
2021 **WATER BOYS** by Haolin Song
2017 **LEGEND OF THE DEMON CAT** by Kaige Chen
2007 **THE GO MASTER** by Zhuangzhuang Tian
2002 **SPRING TIME IN A SMALL TOWN** by Zhuangzhuang Tian

SELECTED APPEARANCES IN TV SERIES

2022 **A LIFELONG JOURNEY** by Lu Li
2021 **WANG YANGMING** by Qi Wu
2021 **GOOD LIFE** by Xiaogang Zhou
2007 **SNOW WOLF** by Jiang Liu

YAO HUANG

Yao HUANG (born Sept. 6, 1994) rose to fame with her leading role in The Crossing (2018), where she played the 16-year-old Peipei who travels between mainland China and Hong Kong every day and is drawn into smuggling. Her brilliant performance in this film won her the Best Actress of Fei Mu Awards in the 2nd Pingyao Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon International Film Festival (2018) and a nomination as Best New Performer in the 26th Beijing College Student Film Festival (2019). In 2021, she starred in the hit drama Mingning Town, playing Bai Maimiao, a girl who returns to her homeland with the determination to thrive in its economy. Huang also received the Magnolia Award for Best Performance by an Actress in a Supporting Role in a Television Series at the Shanghai International TV Festival (2021).

Huang appeared in many other films or TV series, including The Long Night, Nice View, Raid on the Lethal Zone, The Hope.

ESSENTIAL FILMOGRAPHY

2023 GONE GRANDMA
2023 RAID ON THE LETHAL ZONE
2023 THE HOPE
2023 THE SHADOWLESS TOWER
2022 THE ITALIAN RECIPE
2022 IN SEARCH OF LOST TIME
2022 BRIGHT FUTURE
2022 NICE VIEW
2021 MY DOCTOR
2021 ENEMY
2021 MINGNING TOWN
2020 THE LONG NIGHT
2018 THE CROSSING

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