



Little Red Flowers

Director: Zhang Yuan
Country: China
Date: 2005

A review by Philip French for *The Observer*:



Since I was three, my favourite Potter story has been Squirrel Nutkin (though it wasn't one of Greene's). It contrasts the exciting perils of being a rebel and the dull rewards of diligent conformity and involves what I later came to recognise as symbolic castration. By an odd coincidence, Zhang Yuan's impressive *Little Red Flowers* deals sensitively with this very subject. The picture is seen almost entirely from the point of view of Qiang, a four-year-old boy placed by his unseen parents in a well-run boarding school for the small children of Communist Party officials and well-connected professionals in what appears to be 1950s China.

For the best of reasons, or so it seems to them, the teachers organise the little kids' lives from morning to night in a kindly manner. Everything is regimented, from the way they dress to the practice of communal defecation. Though keen to earn the eponymous little red flowers given for tasks properly executed, Qiang rebels against the officious rituals. Though he briefly gets the others to join him, he's finally ostracised by his fellow pupils. The story is told with simplicity and insight and is among the best films from China within the past few years.

From: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/film/2007/jan/07/drama.philipfrench>

Extracts from an interview with the director by Shelly Kraicer

I've been preparing for this film for six years. Wang Shuo gave me a copy of his novel before I started editing my film 'Seventeen Years', and I read it for the first time in Italy in 1999 while I was in post production. In the middle of reading the book, I was watching a cartoon called 'The Little Flying Elephant' with my daughter Yuanyuan. I noticed that she had tears in her eyes as she watched the baby elephant clinging to its mother. I realised that, no matter how young children might be (my daughter was not yet two years old), they have a complete soul, a full set of emotions. I also marvelled at Wang Shuo's ability to remember so much about the past. I'm trying to do the same, because memories of my own past are fragmented and incomplete. So to make a film from Wang Shuo's novel is also an effort to recapture, to discover my own childhood.

How was your own kindergarten experience? Did you fit in, or were you a rebellious child, like the film's protagonist Qiang?

I was kind of like Qiang when I was a kid. I was often ill, so I couldn't join in with the other kids when they were having fun playing together. I couldn't be a member of the group. Anyway, when I got back from Italy, I started working with Wang Shuo and screenwriter Ning Dai on the screenplay. But we had difficulty finding a way to tell the story. Finally, last year, I thought, "Oh, I've got it!".



'Little Red Flowers' doesn't seem to resemble a standard Chinese children's film. Is that your intention?

In the past, all children's films coming out of China treated children as if they were adults. I hope with this work to restore the reality of children's lives to film. In fact, this isn't my first film about a child. At the beginning of my career I made 'Mama' (1992), which centres on an 11-year-old boy. I even inserted a tribute to *Zero de Conduite* in that film — when the child plucks feathers out of a down pillow.

The story's time and place are not specified, although it's possible to identify a setting as Beijing round the late 1950s, when Wang Shuo himself was a young child. I'm interested in a fable's lack of specificity. I noticed that children in kindergarten today are really not that different from the children back then. They face the same issues, issue that are just as relevant today as they were back then... Most psychologists describe the period from 3 years old onward as a critical period for socialisation. So I've chosen a story about children at this age to address the genesis of personality, and of an individual's relationship to society. We all say that childhood is happy. But in making this film, I discovered that childhood is not what people normally make it out to be. Children's lives are more complex, and their hopes, disappointments, and especially their loneliness are comparable to adults', and may linger through their whole lives.

Under the surface, this film seems to be talking about issues of power and discipline that surround children.

I'm quite interested in the genesis of power: how power shapes personality, how power defines characters. Free will vs. control; the individual vs. the masses; all these issues interest me. A story about early childhood allows us to see how power relations play out right from the beginning.

Describe how you found the children who acted in 'Little Red Flowers'

The moment I spotted Dong Bowen in a group of kids, I decided this is our guy. We had a crew combing the entire Beijing for about 4 or 5 months. We put ads for child actors in newspapers, and went to all the large kindergartens. We must have interviewed and videotaped over 20,000 kids. This was a very laborious process. And casting the male lead was the most difficult, until I stumbled upon 5 year old Dong Bowen, who looks so much like the book's author Wang Shuo. This was something uncanny. He of course had had no experience acting. But the moment you see this eyes, you can tell he is perfect for the role. Because his eyes touch people: it's the life inside. When we test screened him, he walked with his arm and leg in sync in a way that was both funny and very serious. It's his seriousness that captures your attention.

How did you handle the needs of the children over the 80 day shooting period?

We set up a virtual kindergarten. We had to arrange everything: where the kids would sleep, what nutritious food they would eat... There were assistant directors working together with nurses and kindergarten teachers: they were all responsible for the children's feeding, care, and studies.

Bowen's little co-star Nanyuan is played by Ning Yuanyuan, who is your daughter. What was it like to work with your daughter?

My confidence in making a film about such young kids actually came from my daughter, since she had acted so successfully last year in a TV series I directed. In this film, it became evident that not only can she act, but that she's a very different person on screen from her real life.

What was it like to work with Dong Bowen and the other children?

It's the hardest thing, to work with kids. It's a lot harder than working with the toughest of adult actors. Work ethics doesn't apply to kids. Instead, you have to create a fun atmosphere. If they like it and enjoy it they'll do the work. Take for example the scene where Bowen swears at Teacher Tang: he really relished that. No matter how many takes you do, he stays with you. Bowen is quite a character, with a lot of complex motivations. Here's one story: the assistant director had to resort to a strategy to have him cry once on cue. The assistant director would say "You're not going home for two months. You're not going to see your parents until you do this right". And that would work: Bowen would start to cry. But later the trick wouldn't work so well, because he'd figure out what's up. Instead, when Bowen was on the verge of crying but couldn't quite do it, he would coach the assistant director, saying: "Say you will keep me here for four months. Or why not say six months?"

From: <http://www.eurekavideo.co.uk/littleredflowers/qanda.html>