



The Coffin Painter

异乡来客

A Film by Da Fei

2021, Fiction, 95min, Digital, 2.39:1, Color, Dolby, Mandarin

Synopsis



Middle-aged Old Jia and teenage girl Seven came to the town and became neighbors under different circumstances. From indifference to being attached, they look for a new life from each other.

In his second feature film *The Coffin Painter*, Da Fei tells a warm story of the cross-generational friendship between two strangers: Jia, an older man who has lost his son, and Seven, a middle school girl who runs from debt with her mother. As a coffin painter, the traditional Chinese craftsman who draws religious symbols on coffins, Jia witnesses people's different attitudes towards their families living and dead. As time passes by, the three characters with distinct personalities drift closer and bring company and warmth to each other.

By depicting the mundane daily life in the remote town, Da Fei embodies people's loneliness in an indifferent world. The sincere and gloomy tone of the film drives us to feel the characters' burdens and sorrow. As Jia and Seven understand and heal each other with their kindness, their life's reverse point eventually comes...

ABOUT THE DIRECTOR



Da Fei 大飞, a Chinese film writer and director, graduated from Shanxi Media College in 2007. In 2018, *Silent Winter* was produced. It was selected in the First Time Filmmaker Section of the 42nd Montreal International Film Festival. It won more than 20 nominations and awards including Best Film, Best Screenwriter at South Africa Independent Film Festival, and Best Original Screenplay at the London International Film Festival in 2019.

2006 Short film *Free Flight*

2018 Feature film *Silent Winter*

2021 Feature Film *The Coffin Painter*

INTERVIEW

What kind of story did you want to tell when you start to write *The Coffin Painter*?

Film is like a mirror, it can reflect the reality of our life, and through this mirror we can see the phenomena that we have ignored. There is a consensus nowadays, the indifference of human feelings, which is there for all to see. People are realistic and everything is about the money. We don't talk about the human kindness anymore. At first, I wanted to tell a story about neighbors. What kind of relationship between them? I wanted to have this contrast, and I came up with the story of a young girl and an old man. The young girl in the film is constantly being bullied, and bullying has been social issue in recent years. Our story is about a young girl who is being bullied and her mother who is under constant pressure from life (loan sharks), and the old man stands up to protect them both. The reality is a lead and that is how this story came out.

Initially, It's a story about neighbors, about human interaction.

Yes, I wanted to show a warm emotion, and this warmth comes from human interactions. We all have neighbors, whether we live in the countryside or in the city, but we don't know them, not even if they are male or female, and there is a sense of mistrust towards them. With our neighbors, we build a mental wall and keep our distances from them. Nowadays, the relationship with the neighbors is much different with what you felt during our childhood.

There are two pairs of parental relationships in the film, a father and son and a mother and daughter, but the parents are both examples of failing parents, why?

I heard the saying that we all keep making mistakes throughout our lives, and throughout our lives we are looking for opportunities to forgive ourselves, and there is something always in one's mind, that is the root of the pain. In this film, after his son is killed, Old Jia slowly realizes his own problems over the years, which is why he ends up drinking with the girl's father after a big fight, saying "no one is born bad", which is his revelation. But in reality, many people make mistakes at a cost that can never be repaired. The distance between them and their children will always remain. We live in an age of technology, it seems that we could easily telephone and have video calls with our parents, but the truth is that the distance is getting bigger.

Why does Old Jia paint coffins?

I saw people painting coffins when I was a child, there is no such job right now. Now coffins no longer need to be painted, they can be carved, and they are more delicate and bigger. In the old days, the deceased was the most important, and a good coffin honored the person. I spent a lot of time to search for someone who still paint the coffin in the real life to paint the coffins in my film. It was inevitable that the profession was now obsolete and that no young people would do this kind of work anymore.

This profession fits Old Jia's state of mind, he was an art teacher in a school, firstly there are professional considerations, and secondly it fits his character - he is reluctant to interact with people, he is even a bit lonely, he only got married and had children in his 40s, the death of his wife and child was a trauma to him, there is no sunshine in his heart. Painting coffins is dealing with the dead, which is an escape in real life, and he also feels that every time he paints a coffin and buries it, it is also an emotional transmission to his wife and child who are resting in peace.

What was the reason for using the traditional Chinese solar terms as time indication in the film?

It's the externalization of my concept of time. The essence of life is the time, without time life does not exist. How does Old Jia spend his life? He would regularly pay tribute to his wife and child. For example, during the Ancestor Worship Festival, he would mark various dates. It is a random day for us, as for him the most important date in his life.



Where are the main locations for this film? Why did you choose that place at that time?

In my hometown of Helan, Shanxi. The main reason is I knew the place well. When I was writing the script, I thought of the landscape and the customs of my hometown. The story doesn't have a strong regional obligation, it takes place in a small town in the north, but you could put it in the south as well.

How did you find Old Jia's actor, Luosangqunpei?

I've seen his work in college, *Xiu Xiu The Sent-Down Girl* (1998), directed by Chen Chong, and I was very impressed by his performance. When I was preparing the film, it happened that a good friend of mine was his agent and posted stills of him, which immediately brought back my memories. I hadn't seen his work for many years, the impression was so strong that I decide to work with him immediately.

What are his qualities that attracted you?

He is like the character of Old Jia, not very eloquent, but strong inside. Old Jia doesn't fit in with the people around him, as he says in the film, "I'd rather draw a line with you guys, but I'll keep my own integrity", which sums up his character very well.

How did you choose the actresses of the mother and daughter?

I believe my intuition, to see how the actor connects with my feeling. I will not consider how good the actor is and how many films he or she has made. I always trust my intuition.



How long was the shooting?

30 days, it was finished around October 2019, and then it went into post-production work.

You made a short film in 2006, and it took ten years before you made your first feature film, *The Silent Winter*, what have you been doing during the ten years?

It is difficult being a director. Before 2016, Chinese young directors do not have as many opportunities as they do now, and there weren't as many festivals and platforms to encourage young talents, including FIRST and Pingyao. And I also felt that I wasn't good enough. Of course, I have been working as assistant director, production manager, location manager, set design and etcetera all along.

Mei Feng is the executive producer, how did you get to know him?

Wu Tianming had a workshop for young screenwriters, and I was a student. As far as I know, Mr. Mei Feng only work with two films of the students of that workshop. He was the script consultant for *Dwelling in the Fuchun Mountains* and I asked him to be the executive producer for my film.

How did him help you?

He has been following us from the script, from the outline to the script until the finished film. We all know that Mr. Mei Feng is a well-known screenwriter in China, and he and Jia Zhangke are the only two screenwriters in China who have won the Cannes Screenplay Award, so having his support will give you more confidence. When I have doubts about something, such as whether the plot will work or not, and when my self-judgement is weak, I have Mr. Mei Feng to help me make a judgement.

Did the script take a long time to finish?

From I start to work on the script till the shooting started, there were only three months. It takes a lot of time to absorb and to feel, when you decide to do the project, it's only a process to sort the information out of your mind. I think all the time, and when I see an interesting story, I can't help but get it over and over in my head.

How did you choose to make films?

It was by mistake, I grew up loving to write, do not love school, I went to junior high school for six years, because I always drop out of school. My father was afraid that I ended up a bad boy, he sent me to the vocational high school to learn accounting. I didn't care about anything; I was just fooling around. It wasn't until the time of the university entrance exam that I was thinking about what to apply for. When I filled the application forms for university, my first option was Tsinghua or Peking University, another screw around. Then my last option was Shanxi Media University, I applied for the major of directing and scenarist. There was an option of "subordinated to distribution", I didn't know what that meant so I ticked the box. And I was accepted by performing major.

You did not choose to become an actor in the end?

I thought at the time that actors were kind of fancy job. But it really helped me to enter the world of cinema. There were people at school selling all kinds of VCDs, and I spent most of my living expenses on buying them. At that time, I was watching films all day long, and I found my direction.

Tell us about your next project.

It will also be a film with social concern, I will focus on the youth suicide. I am now studying the data, which is powerful. There is a statistic showing that China ranks first in global youth suicide, and the first cause of youth death is also suicide, not any disease. At first, like most people, I wondered why children nowadays are so mentally fragile and have no mental capacity at all. Then I asked myself, "What is the fault of the children?"

Chinese parents always think they give their children the best to send them to go to the best school and to the most expensive tuition classes, but they pay very little attention to their mental health. On the other hand, our society does not protect the children well. We need to do self-examination and could not assign all the responsibilities to the children. For my next film, I hope it could be more profound and realistic.



CREDITS



Director: Da Fei

Screenwriter: Da Fei

Director of Photography: Tang Lai Kwong

Editor: Wang Yuye, Yuan Ze

Production Designer: Liang Huajin

Sound Designer: Li Danfeng

Music: Xiao Bohan

Starring: Luosangqunpei, Zhang Zimu, Liu Lu

Producer: Bai Xiaobai

Presenter: Lin Dibang

Executive Producer: Mei Feng

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