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MOVIES

# 'Chinese Portrait' ('Wo De Jing Tou'): Film Review | Filmart 2019

5:30 PM PDT 3/17/2019 by Clarence Tsui

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### THE BOTTOM LINE

*A subjective gaze at the state of contemporary China.*



## Chinese auteur Wang Xiaoshuai reconstructs his and his country's past through images of cities, factories and trains filmed throughout the past decade.

A ceaseless stream of tableaux showing how people study, work, pray and worry in cities and villages across China in the last 10 years, *Chinese Portrait* makes an offbeat addition to acclaimed director Wang Xiaoshuai's filmography and is the first full-length documentary in his career. It also sums up what he has been trying to achieve in three decades of highly varied fictional features. True to both its English and Chinese ('My Lens') titles, *Chinese Portrait* is a subjective and utterly revealing snapshot of the state of Wang's country.

Devoid of voiceovers, dialogue or onscreen descriptions, *Chinese Portrait* has made much fewer waves among buyers and programmers (it bowed in Busan, then IDFA) compared to the director's more accessible fictional titles. But the success in Berlin of his feature *So Long, My Son*, which won best actor and actress awards last month, has given the documentary a new lease on life. Cinema Guild has picked up U.S. rights and is set to release the film theatrically later this year.

With its powerful, panoramic survey of a society in transformation — consider this the earnest, narrator-free equivalent of Patrick Keiller's sardonic *Robinson* film trilogy — the doc provides a key to understanding Wang and the sixth-generation Chinese filmmakers of which he is a part. It fits into a growing number of unconventional Chinese documentaries driven by the cutting and remixing of existing material, like Zhu Shengze's Rotterdam winner *Present.Perfect* or Lei Lei's Berlin Forum title *Breathless Animals*.

According to Wang, *Chinese Portrait* was born in 2009 out of his urge to pay tribute to the work of his painter friend Liu Xiaodong. Director Jia Zhangke had previously highlighted Liu in his more

conventional documentary *Dong* in 2006. Here, instead, Wang travels up and down China, creating his own cine-paintings from people leading their everyday lives.

The predominant style of *Chinese Portrait* is static shots in which subjects — miners, fishermen, students, passengers on a train — pose for Wang's camera. In one clever shot, the posing is double: Amid the wreckage of the Sichuan earthquakes, he films young women posing for a painter (presumably Liu) on the edge of the screen.

Many of the scenes in *Chinese Portrait* focus on labor. There are farmers cultivating potatoes in a field; technicians monitoring a steel furnace; an army of workers stationed at sewing machines on a shop floor; and office workers in suits staring into rows of computers which seem to go on forever. But there are also nods to China's post-industrial landscape, depicted in retired workers visiting the emptied shell of their soon-to-be-demolished factory, a showroom with models of future skyscrapers and vast shopping arcades looming large over hawkers and pedestrians.

The enormous cultural and economic disparity in China is vividly revealed in Wang's scenes of rural life and Valérie Loiseleux's telling editing. Impoverished kids in the arid western hinterlands line up outside their made-in-mud schools, in sharp contrast to classrooms in metropolitan universities. A shot of people idling outside rickety huts is followed by young uniformed chefs taking a break in the back of city noodle restaurants. There are even visual collisions within the frame, as when traditional ethnic-minority musicians perform in a modern downtown car park.

These juxtapositions hint at Wang's thoughts about the direction China is heading and how its different communities fare amidst such changes. But *Chinese Portrait* also marks the director's own rite of passage in life. He appears onscreen in shots filmed in Tiananmen Square, where the military clampdown on pro-democracy movements in 1989 shaped the worldview of Wang's generation of artists and filmmakers. We see him again on a train, which probably represents his memories of his family being "sent down" from Shanghai to China's southwestern backwaters during the Cultural Revolution, and then again outside a crumbling factory from the industrial urban landscapes he grew up in as a teenager.

More than just chronicling a country in transformation, *Chinese Portrait* signals seismic shifts in cinema as well. The differences in textures and aspect ratios of the different scenes reveal the universal leap of filmmaking from analog to digital, as grainy 4:3 aspect ratio shots sit alongside sharp, widescreen vistas. Demanding attention, imagination and critical viewing from the audience, *Chinese Portrait* is nevertheless one for posterity.

*Production companies: WXS Productions, Dongchun Films (Beijing), Chinese Shadows*

*Director: Wang Xiaoshuai*

*Producers: Isabelle Glachant, Liu Xuan with Liang Ying*

*Executive producers: Qian Yini*

*Director of photography: Wu Di, Zeng Jian, Zeng Hui, Piao Xinghai*

*Editor-sound designer: Valérie Loiseleux*

*Sales: Asian Shadows*

*In Mandarin*

*80 minutes*

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3:46 PM PDT 3/30/2020 by Inkoo Kang



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