

VARIETY

Busan Film Review: ‘Knife in the Clear Water’

[Maggie Lee](#)

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An old farmer has difficulty giving up his bull for sacrifice in “[Knife in the Clear Water](#),” a somber elegy richly lensed like a rotating gallery of oil paintings. While news related to Muslim ethnic groups in China has largely focused on Uighurs and their separatist movement, this minimalist debut by [Wang Xuebo](#) affords a rare glimpse into the Hui, a Chinese-speaking Muslim group, as well as their faith and docile views about destiny. While the downbeat, sparsely-plotted yarn risks turning into an ethnographic pastoral at times, it also observes their dire poverty and probably disappearing agrarian lifestyles. Some audiences may understandably tune out the film’s sleepy rhythm, but those who rate imagery over dialogue or drama may buy its earthy simplicity.

According to Wang, who produced Tibetan helmer Pema Tseden’s “Tharlo” before making his own directorial debut, he decided to frame for a 4:3 aspect ratio in emulation of Russian master Andrei Tarkovsky, as well as painters Andrew Wyeth and Jean-Francois Millet. While this film lacks the aesthetic or philosophical depths of Tarkovsky’s work, its swarthy lighting of primitive, electricity-free interiors and blending of human figures into stunning images of parched, mountainous terrain in Ningxia do evoke the abstract-realism of Wyeth and the rural lyricism of Millet.

On the day of his wife’s burial, Ma Zishan (Yang Shengcang) must plan for the “Arba’een” ceremony to be held on the 40th day after her passing. His son (Yang Shengcang, a different actor with the same name) pleads with him to slaughter their only bull to feed the large number of guests who’ll come to pay respects. The farmer has no grounds on which to refuse: His wife deserves to be honored for working hard all her life, and besides, the bull is old and has little strength left to plow the fields. And yet, he cannot part with the animal that, much like his wife, labored meekly for him all its life, especially since he’s already lost his closest companion.

As if aware of its impending doom, the bull loses its appetite, falls ill and becomes too weak to till the soil. Believing in the traditional wisdom, which holds that when an animal has been marked for slaughter, the beast sees the reflection of a knife in the way and recoils with fear. Although it’s never

spelled out, the protagonist secretly sees the bull as a kindred spirit — a domesticated slave, passively getting on in years, its lonely, inconsequential death looming not so far off. A calm, soft-spoken man and a patient listener, he nonetheless carries an air of dejection around him.

Not a lot happens in the 90 or so minutes leading up to the ceremony, but seeing Ma and his neighbors struggle to till the fallow soil underlines the inhospitable nature of their environs. Ma's only livestock other than the bull is a lone little lamb. The screenplay by Wang, Shi Shuqing, Ma Jinlian, and Ma Yue is built around the small handful of people in Ma's orbit, all of whom are also dirt poor. A scene in which Ma visits his niece to return a piddly sum his wife borrowed is subtly wrenching. Ma wishes his son could return from the town to help him farm, but predictably, he says it's easier to find jobs in town to feed the young mouths at home, suggesting the age-old community is already on its way to dissolution.

The helmer eyes their lot with perceptive detachment, avoiding a strident voice of social protest or melodramatic lament. He also captures the peace and piety of the community during worship. Ma's meeting with the Imam transcends his guilt toward the bull, turning the consultation into a lesson on how to accept one's role in God's chain of being. A silent scene in which Ma reads the Quran under a frail, swaying oil lamp the night before the 40-day ritual evokes a kind of spiritual rhapsody.

The senior Yang's wrinkled face appears to be a depository of a lifetime of back-breaking labor and other untold turmoil. The final shots take one's breath away, transporting audiences into a symbolic realm where the old man's inner landscape mirrors the barren, snow-blanketed exterior, inviting viewers to wonder whether he is at peace or has his heart frozen after losing everything.

<http://variety.com/2016/film/reviews/knife-in-the-clear-water-review-1201877453/>

'Knife in the Clear Water' ('Qingshui Li De Daozi'): Film Review | Busan 2016

3:52 AM PDT 10/10/2016 by Clarence Tsui



Chinese producer-turned-director Wang Xuebo's feature debut revolves around a man's struggle to keep his beloved bull from being used as sacrifice for his dead wife's funeral rites.

Boasting melancholic visions of western China and remarkably evocative performances from an entirely non-professional cast, *Knife in the Clear Water* is an incredibly heartfelt and beautifully tragic portrayal of a patriarch's unspoken bond with his bull.

Having landed in Busan's New Currents section, first-time director Wang Xuebo – whose previous credits include producing Pema Tseden's acclaimed *Tharlo* – is perhaps now ready to switch over to the director's chair full-time. Counting Pema Tseden as well as Hong Kong helmer Derek Yee and Chinese director Zhang Meng as executive producers, *Knife in the Clear Water* will definitely cut its way through the festival circuit. Its next stop is in the Vancouver festival's Young Cinema competition.

Wang's audacious vision is apparent from the very start, as the film unspools in the boxed-in 4:3 ratio. Defying the more common practice of screening windswept rural landscapes in the widest proportions possible, Wang is perhaps making a statement that *Knife* is no mere exploitation of exotic geographical and cultural vistas. Based on Shi Shuqing's novel, this film is first and foremost a portrait of a man and

his humanity – a character in his twilight years struggling with the death of his wife and then his best animal friend.

The head of a family in the far-flung, challenging plateaus of China's Ningxia Autonomous Region, Ma Zishan (Yang Shengcang) has barely recovered from losing his spouse before his son (Yang Shengcang, unrelated) talks to him about the need to kill the family bull to feed the guests attending the "purification" ceremony making the 40th day of his mother's death.

Knowing he couldn't say no given the family's limited resources, Ma doesn't exactly say yes either – and just as he resigns himself to his fate, the already thin and ailing bull seemingly does the same by refusing to eat, adding to Ma's pain. Departing from common depictions of rural patriarchs as reactionary tyrants, the protagonist here is the odd sentimentalist quite different from his more pragmatic kin: his grandson, for example, is already talking about which part of the animal he looks forward to eating.

Cold, for sure, but think of the extreme circumstances these folks have to endure. In what amounts nearly to ethnography, Wang shows the family struggling to sustain itself by securing basic things like water, grass and even soft earth (for the bull's pen).

All of which only makes Ma's feelings that more lyrical and moving. Yang's performance is staggeringly authentic, and even the stoniest cynic will be moved by the film's emotional finale, in which Ma prepares for the parting of his bull with a hushed recital of the Koran and a final walk in the mountains with the animal. Wang Weihua's camerawork captures the harsh realities faced by Ma and his family, and provides the actors a great platform against which they can unleash their silent, suppressed emotional maelstroms.

Production Company: Blackfin (Beijing) Culture & Media

Cast: Yang Shengcang, Yang Shengcang, Zhou Jinhua, Yang Fan

Director: Wang Xuebo

Screenwriters: Shi Shuqing, Wang Xuebo, Ma Jinlian, Ma Yue, based on the eponymous novel by Shi Shuqing

Producer: Wang Xuebo, Wang Zijian, Chen Cheng, Chen Jian

Executive director: Xu Li, Chen Yaojun, Hou Dawei, Ma Zongying, Long Feng, Wang Zijian, Derek Yee, Zhang Meng, Pema Tseden, Zhu Laicheng, Lhahua Gyal

Director of photography: Wang Weihua

Production designer: Yang Wei

Editors: Guo Xiaodong, Liao Ching-song, Wang Xuebo

Sound designer: Fu Kang

Casting directors: Tashi, Ma Zhiwen

International Sales: Asian Shadows

In Mandarin

93 minutes

<http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/knife-clear-water-qingshui-li-936101>