



CinemaTalk: Interview with Yang Lina, director of *Longing for the Rain*

by Xu Jia and Kevin B. Lee



Longing for the Rain (dir. Yang Lina)

Making documentaries since 1996, director **Yang Lina** was first recognized for her intimate record of a group of retired seniors in a Beijing residential community in *Old Men* (1999), with which she swept almost every top award in documentary film festivals all over the world. Later on, she continued to amaze audiences and professionals with other documentaries like *The Love Story of Lao An* (2008). Earlier, she also appeared in Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (2000) as an actress.

Longing for the Rain marks Yang Lina's progression from documentary to feature filmmaking. In [IFFR 2013](#), some adored this film as a daunting portrayal of a well-off desperate housewife hungry for unattainable sex and the explicit sexual scenes in her wild dreams were just unprecedented in Chinese cinema – this film showed the sexual audacity and awkwardness of the rising new rich, the emptiness of a fidgeting soul and the impossibility of self-help at a certain period of one's life, by a female director, from China – it was a breath of fresh air. Some disliked it because the series of repeated wet dreams just seemed endless and there were better ways to solve a woman's pent-up sexual desire, other than turning to various superstitious resolutions, also, the representation of the husband looked too impotent, at some point even

ridiculous – it was suspected to draw a derogatory picture of the Chinese people, only to cater for western imagination, like what a number of previous award-winning films had done.

To quote one of the programmers in IFFR that this film is a total new voice, unheard in previous male-dominant Chinese cinema; that it depicts the conflicts between capitalism and communism, between the urban and the rural; that it explores the contemporary female lives and their desires. Yang said she had around \$320,000 (2 million RMB) at her disposal and was grateful to have top professionals in her crew.

Whether you like this film or not, it will be written into Chinese film history as it is the first film ever that presents woman's sexual desire so bluntly, by a mainland filmmaker.

– Xu Jia



Yang Lina (photo: The Hollywood Reporter)

An interview with Yang Lina by Kevin B. Lee and Xu Jia

We have read so much about you and your various works, but how would you describe yourself as a filmmaker?

I was a dancer by training and then did theater for ten years. But in my film, like *Old Men* and the followings ones, you can tell that I like story-telling. The concept of a feature film has been with me for long, but I was yet to grasp the techniques to present a feature at the time. After years of making documentaries, the chance to make a feature film came and I started to write down the story. However, documentary is like a shadow and it is unlikely to separate it from my feature filmmaking. In this film, I tried to combine elements of both documentary and feature together in my film, but it was not easy. I am a fan of *Dogma 95*, but it is difficult to achieve that.

Who did you make this film for?

Independent films like this one is impossible to screen in mainstream cinemas back in China as it is not able to pass the censorship, so it can only be seen in film festivals like Rotterdam and watched by a small crowd. It is a film from my heart and there is a slight chance that it could reach a big audience. I dedicate this film to life itself. Thanks to my previous documentary filmmaking, I was so touched by my subjects that I felt like nobody: I knew little about life and it was their wisdom and knowledge that taught me the meaning of life. In our education system, nobody tells you how to tell right from wrong. We grow up on our own. In school, nobody would tell you that you are a woman and how important woman is, nor did our moms tell us. It was life that taught us that in a woman's life, one can be independent and make her own choices. The world is not just controlled by men.

The sexual themes are very exclusive even in Chinese independent films, especially female sexuality, so that is also a very original aspect of the film. Why did you decide to make it that explicit with the sex toys, masturbation and nudity? It's obvious that you don't have to do that, unless you really want to.

In real life, women's desire has always been there, but I don't understand why it should become a taboo in film. There are many outlets for people's lust and sexual passion. To a certain degree, I'd say China has already become one of the most open countries that people have a rather high level of sexual liberation. One night stands are not unusual while female's sexual desire was rarely present in Chinese cinema, especially in female director's works. I think we are all direct people then why not act directly? China is now a kingdom of sex, a kingdom of liberation. No matter with money or through marriage, you can get sex. Sex is not a problem and I feel even in the United States, people are not so open to sex. There is no need for me to conceal it.

To make a woman's film is what I want to do because I'd find it unreasonable for myself to make yet another movie about men in a patriarchal society. For me, personally, in real life I have a relatively good life and most of the time I feel I have freedom, but is such freedom suitable for me? For some people, sex is a matter of random choice, but for others, it is not. What I want is to express women's contradictory emotions and depressed sexuality. It is not like once the society becomes open in terms of sex, everybody enjoys sex without concerns accordingly. Such freedom is a delusion. A rather ungrounded freedom. For example, it seems now in China people can talk about homosexuality, unlike what was in the old days. It has become a trendy topic but in terms of legalizing equal marriage, people are no longer that enthusiastic or allowed to argue.

The spiritual aspect of this film is very interesting. To me, it feels very conflicted, ambivalent about religion. Maybe you could talk a little bit about your religious background. What approach you want to take to explore this dimension?

Many generations of my family were Buddhists. I myself used to be one of them. I am not sure whether I will be a Buddhist again, but for now, at least I don't worship Buddha and I am not a

vegetarian. I think it is a self-destructive process, a damaging force. I am sympathetic with critical films with clergymen and nuns in Western movies, for example *Mother Joan of the Angels* by Jerzy Kawalerowicz. The conflict probably originates from my unresolvable inner conflict. Except for my two main actresses, everybody acts himself or herself, including the Taoist priest and the large monk. In 2008 and 2009, I shot a documentary in a temple and become familiar with the monks. As for the Taoist priest, you could see my own attitude towards religion and feel a certain degree of absurdity.

How did you come up with the idea of the *ghost*?

Ghost is one of the cultural elements in our Eastern philosophy. It is a huge pity that my maternal grandmother passed away really early and I didn't have a camera then and thus not able to have a conversation with her any more. The more I grow up, the more I want to go back to my past. It is only through the ghost can I express my protagonist's desire. I feel it is the most suitable vehicle to depict her sexual anxiety.

Your previous works like *Lao An*, even though it's hand-held, it is very steady and soothing, but this film looks disruptive and even turbulent. Could you talk about the different feelings these film evoke?

I think it might be feature film's glamour. Also, regarding the visuals, this time, it is a different cinematographer; in my documentary, it was only my own breathing, but in a feature, each brings his or her own breathing, including actors. I found the leading actress through audition and the supporting actress has been a close friend of mine for thirty years. I did not have a script. The two-page synopsis was actually required by the cinematographer and my producer who insisted it was a must to carry our work on. I had the actors on set and told them about the basis idea of each scene and they gradually got used to this way of working despite some initial challenges for the professional actors as they were used to be told what to say and how to move. It was the amateur actor, my supporting actress, who was most adaptable: The funniest scene is the one in the car where they are talking about the dildo. It was all improvisation and only a few words of instruction were given. The supporting actress did a very good job but I wanted a second take. She paused her acting and said well, let us proceed as I am done with this scene. Basically I only made one take or two because I wanted to ensure the actors feel at ease, not bored. I'd prefer a subtle performance than a sensational one. Occasionally when the actors were not in their best condition I would give them a day off. The next day, they'd be much more actively creative. I finished shooting this film in twenty days, but the post-production took me two years.

What is your opinion about films like *The Piano Teacher*? And who are your favorite film directors?

I have watched that film, but I think my story is quite different. Recently I am watching Bergman, whose films feature mothers, daughters and their relationship. I like these films, but I find it impossible to borrow anything to my film, maybe for my next film, but not for *Longing for the Rain*. Maybe aesthetically applicable, but in emotional aspects, it is not possible. Our world is too different from theirs, so my limitation is that I can only make a film of my own style. I am now in awe of Bergman. In my thirties, I was easily hypnotized by his works, but now I am just fascinated by his late films. Also, this year, I systematically watched every film by Werner Herzog.

<http://dgeneratefilms.com/uncategorized/cinemataalk-interview-with-yang-lina-director-of-longing-for-the-rain>