

OLD STONE

In Johnny Ma's thrilling debut feature, a Chinese taxi driver finds himself plunged into a Kafkaesque nightmare where no good deed goes unpunished. Beginning as a gritty social-realist drama before u-turning into a blood-drenched noir, *Old Stone* follows the repercussions of a car accident in a society where life is cheap and compassion is ruinously expensive.

When a drunken passenger causes Lao Shi to swerve and hit a motorcyclist, the driver stops to help the injured man. When no police or ambulance arrive he drives the victim to the hospital, checks him in and finds himself liable for the man's medical bills. The repercussions of Shi's selfless act expose a society rife with bone-chilling callousness and bureaucratic indifference. On the verge of losing his cab, his job and his family, Lao Shi (in a riveting performance by Chen Gang) has to resort to desperate measures to survive.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

A few years ago while traveling, I had overheard a story about a truck driver who hit and injured a man in the middle of the night. But instead of calling for help, when the truck driver saw that no one was around to witness the accident, he drove backwards onto the injured man, killing him.

After the police investigation, the truck driver finally confessed to the murder and explained that his act was due to purely a practical reason: if the injured person had lived, he would be paying the man's hospital bill for the rest of his life. But if the injured had died at the scene, the truck driver would only have to pay a one-time fee to the man's family as compensation. So after weighing his options, the truck driver decided it was more practical to kill than to save a human life.

Immediately, images started to pop into my head and I knew had to find a way try to express this unbelievable dilemma that drove this truck driver to commit murder. The decision the truck driver had made scared me even more because I had actually understood his reasoning. In a sort of "if I was in his shoes" situation, with the same lot in life and knowledge about the society around him, I wondered how I, myself, would've decided to act. It scared me to the core that I didn't really know the answer.

To me, the "Old Stone" story is my way of expressing what I had felt for a long time that, in our society, it is harder and harder for people to do good deeds. Everyone looks after their own interest first before considering anyone else.

It is not my goal to point fingers with this film. I only want to reflect the reality of what is happening in our society. That the man of the modern time is practical to the point of being inhumane. In this story, there should be no final conclusion of good or evil, only different shades of the gray areas that each man must navigate according to himself.

– Johnny Ma

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHNNY MA

What's the development process for the film after you conceived the original idea?

The way I make films has been the same for the last two shorts and this first feature. I always start with an idea and a location where I can possibly explore the idea completely and flexibly. I would then try to live there for as long as I can on my own, meeting people, just in general learning about what it would be like to live there as the character. I always love this period of the process as this is when everything is just fresh and new and everything is possible. I would pick out a character I meet and we would talk and try to imagine a story with him. And if it's not interesting for me then I move on to another. The story of *Old Stone* was the exact same way. I told my producer about this idea and then we went travelling for 3 weeks visiting Chengdu, Chongqing and his hometown, a sleepy little town called Guangde in the Anhui province. Immediately the first night we arrive in Guangde we were struck by a thick fog that covers the entire town at night. It felt like the story we wanted to tell. And then after that it was a simple decision. We just went to work.

Why the professions of the characters - a taxi driver and a private nursery owner?

In the beginning, I definitely felt the pressure to get away from the profession of taxi drivers because of the iconic film *Taxi Driver*. But eventually I felt the profession was just right for the film. A story like this happens all the time in Asia. I felt the profession of taxi driver was a good fit for the middle ground between private and public responsibility. I wanted to make a film about that, with bureaucracy as a character in the film. As a taxi driver, Lao Shi would have to jump through the hoops of the Taxi Company, insurance company, hospital, police, and lawyers. Everything is unfamiliar to him, but he does it all because it's the standard procedures and he believes he is doing a good thing. I always love characters on the move. I love the Dardenne brothers in that they keep their characters moving through space all the time. It's exhausting to watch but also exhilarating. I feel like one of the big differences between our generation and the previous work generation is that stability is no longer a smart strategy to move up in society. Now everyone knows the way to earn more money and get better jobs is to jump around from company to company. And the people who choose to stay in one company or one job tend to be the "Lao Shi"s of this world.

And in this world that we live in now, Lao Shi's way is no longer the smart way to get ahead. Mao Mao is smart enough to understand that, and she is the one trying to keep the family moving up to create a better future for them. She understands the rules of this world and she knows how to survive in it. But that is also precisely why she loves Lao Shi, because he is different than the rest, he represents the old way of doing things, perhaps a more noble way.

Would you please talk about how you approach the environment and its people?

I always felt the most important thing was to make an honest film. No matter where I film or what is the subject. From my background I immigrated to Canada at 10, so I consider myself both a Canadian and a Chinese. But I am very aware when I am trying to work in China that I will always be considered an outsider, and this is how I'm still treated to some extent in the west.

But in China, I didn't want to make a poverty porn. I felt if I can't bring myself to really understand what it is like to live in this town and environment then I don't deserve to make this film. I have always and will always strive for as much authenticity as possible. That's why I always have a long stretch of pre-production time (some times 6 months, sometimes a year) in order to really live like a local person. Obviously I cannot erase my background but I feel, with enough empathy and effort, I can do my best to grasp the knowledge I need to make this film authentic. And I also think being an outsider is also very important; it helps you to see everything more clearly, in terms of observing hypocrisy that someone who is local might have difficulties seeing. It's not an easy process, but it's my way of working. And I do the only thing that I can do, which is work harder than anyone else. Then at least to myself I will know that I've tried.

The constant sounds of radio & TV broadcast in the ambience, and movement of crowds in the public space - what do these elements mean to you personally?

I wanted to create an authentic experience of what it's like to actually be in China. As real and raw as possible. The random sound you hear in the public space, the weird dance or things that occur around the street for no reason at all is all a part of the experience. And then I wanted moments of elation, something really cinematic that only film can accomplish. That's really one of the big difference in the medium of film. It's that we can achieve some kind of poetry with music, sound and visuals to allow the audience to really feel something... well, that's the hope at least.

What's it like to work in both English and Chinese when writing?

I write in English, this is the way I think creatively. But in dialogues, I hear in Chinese or what I imagine what the characters would say. I never trust my writing of the Chinese dialogue because I always feel the actors who are playing the characters would always be able to give me something better. And so that's my way of also empowering them to allow them the possibility to make their characters more like themselves.

For my own writing, I tend to focus mostly on dramatic structure and emotional beats. To me that is the skeleton of what an exciting story might be in the end. I leave the characters and the details that make them authentic to the actors always. I hope that

if I cast right, then I don't have to direct the actors too much. They would just be that person.

Then if I can, I try to hang out with that actor as much as possible, hoping to learn and steal more from his own life that I can use to enrich the character and the script more. Through these conversations and chats then I revise the script again and then with their voices in mind. I always work with my producer in translating the script to Chinese. But when I give it to the actors I always give it to them with one warning, that they should not say anything that is actually written, because it is translated and without authenticity, they need to make it their own.

With the right actors they take this on as a task and they will really have something to chew on. I found this type of process works best with non-professionals who can give me so much just by being who they are. But with actors, they need much more from the script, they treat the dialogue like the words of God. And I always try to tell them, the dialogue is shit, change it and make it yours. Sometimes it works, but other times the actors have been so used to "acting" that they cannot give their real self to the role. That's when there is a lot of work as a director, and it is never a perfect result.

Old Stone is a mix of non-professional actors and professional actors. Why did you make this decision and what was the challenges?

I would've loved to keep working on *Old Stone* with non-professionals. There is something so wonderful and pure because it's always a discovery when working with people who were essentially living the lives of your characters. I find that I learn more about my story and the film is better when I work with non-professionals because they give you so many real authentic things that no writer can think of. But maybe I'm just not that good of a writer. Unfortunately, we weren't lucky enough this time to meet a non-professional actor who we thought would be able to handle the role of Lao Shi. Because of the pressure we started to look for professional actors. It was not an easy casting process as Chinese actors don't generally audition for roles. No matter how big of an actor or how small they are. So we really had to trust our instincts regarding who could take on the role of Lao Shi. The character is essentially on the screen for 99% of the film. If we cast right, then the film would be made and it would be good. Luckily we were able to find Chen Gang who had the screen presence and the professionalism to pull off the role.

Once Lao Shi was cast I knew I had to also cast a set of professional actors, especially for the role of Mao Mao, mostly to match the screen presence that Chen Gang had as the main character. I was very scared and worried about the mix. But then, as with any film with new challenges, the only way to deal with them is to face your fears front on.

We see some of the most important figures from the 6th generations in Lao Shi, like Wang Hongwei (*Xiao Wu, Platform*), Nai An (producer of *Summer*)

***Palace, Spring Fever*). What's the first time you saw any of the works from the 6th generation, and where did you see them ?**

I left China when I was about 10 years old in 1992, before the time any of the 6th generation had made their marks on Chinese cinema. I never really got a chance to see those works until I was much older. I probably watched their films when I was starting to study filmmaking myself. But it didn't really hit me how important they were to the development of Chinese independent cinema until I was in China making *Grand Canal*. In some way, when I was making *Grand Canal* I educated myself on everything that I missed during my absence from China, and it was those films. They spoke to me more than any of the 5th generation or HK cinema. I realized it was the world I knew and had left and that I was nostalgic about. In some way, *Grand Canal* was shot as an homage to that era of filmmaking. So imagine my amazement to work with my heroes like Nai An and Wang Hongwei in my own first feature. I just hope I made something that makes them proud.

What's the difference between making a feature and making *Grand Canal*, your successful thesis film? What's your hope for *Old Stone*?

In some way, *Grand Canal* prepared us to make *Old Stone*. No one knew who we were when we made *Grand Canal*, and in some way that worked in our favor because it was made for very little money and we were seen as students making a class project. A lot of favors were given to us because of it. And when the film was successful I think it was a surprise for the people that helped us to make it.

With *Old Stone*, although the budget is not much, there is still some real money at stake. With the first feature we were met with lots of cynicism, people either thought we had money and tried to get as much from us as possible or they didn't trust that we knew how to make a film. Everything was bigger with *Old Stone*. We shot 28 days in 30 days. We had 50 or so actors and extras. There was no way I could keep the entire story in my head. I had to give up control and trust my colleagues. Some of them really stepped up and kept the whole thing together. In the end, making a film is the same whether it's a long form or short form. It's all about story. A feature film just takes longer and you just have to stick it out until the end, even when there is no one with you. You are the only force that can push the film to completion. If you give up on your film, no one will pick you up and finish it for you. It's only when you are determined and driven that other like-minded collaborators will follow you until the end.

I hope *Old Stone* will get the audience reaction it deserves. It's not a perfect film, but its rawness and imperfection is what I always wanted from the film. Will the film be successful? It's hard to know. One of the big differences regarding short and feature filmmaking is that on a feature you never know what you got until you show it to the audience. And if it's not ready, you have to be strong enough to go back to the drawing board and keep going.

Family seems to be a running motif in your films, both feature and shorts. Why's that?

If you are making an Asian film, there is no way to avoid the family structure. I love the films of Ozu, and the Ang Lee's family trilogy. And *Yi Yi*, the master piece from Edward Yang. I feel like I'm trying to understand my relationship with my family and so I try again and again to put them into my film, mostly unsuccessfully in really digging into anything substantial or deep. But just like it took Edward Yang all of his career to make *Yi Yi*, where all his other films were attempts at figuring out the complex story structure he used in that film. Ozu also spent his entire life making films about one family in one city. I will keep talking about family as a character in hopes to answer my own questions about the family structure.

Everyone in China seems to be talking about co-productions of a bigger scale, but yours was a China / Canada "independent co-production". How do you feel about it ?

In 2013 we came to China to make *Grand Canal*, but also it was at the same time to see whether or not a small independent production can be done by people like us, who are essentially outsiders. I've been to many of those big scale co-production meetings. There is a lot of talk but not a lot of action, most of it stemming from people not really understanding what it is like to make a film in China. And there is a lot of misunderstanding the other way around as well because the bigger scale productions in China are typically always run by business people who really don't care about story or the film. They care about stars and prestige and not whether or not a story stems from anything real. This is a very basic and important difference between the filmmakers and the people in power who are financing the films. I feel like every independent Chinese film made is essentially a miracle. The amount of barriers a filmmaker would have to face in China is ten times greater than filmmakers have to face in the west. You are dealing with the censorship board, you are dealing with local government, you are dealing with Chinese actors (everyone of them wants to be treated like Brad Pitt)... It takes a team of powerful and idealistic youth who don't give a shit about anything to get it done these days. I really don't see it any other way in China. If you play the game that's set up and compromise your story, then you won't even have a film you can be proud of. So I certainly think that the next time I tackle a independent production, I won't ever compromise anything for the story.

What's the differences between a Chinese set and a set in New York?

Every set is different, and you as the director set the tone for your set. There are definitely some very crazy ways people prefer to work in China that is very different than the west. For example, it's very "usual" for a Chinese crew to shoot 15 or 16 hours a day because of the lack of a union. We actually shot 28 days in 30 days, which would have never happened in New York. But even though you work hard as the filmmaker, you also have a lot of flexibility, so if one day you do need a little more

time you could take that time. I always appreciated that time aspect of shooting in China. There is no such thing as a craft table. Every department head usually has a few assistants where perhaps in New York one person can do the job. The hierarchy on a Chinese set is very apparent - not everyone is from the same background or education level. And there is always way more people than you want on your set, and you have no idea what they do. You do your best to learn everyone's names and you try to be friendly but then you find out it's more efficient if you just do your job as a director and stop trying to make everyone like you. There are also some strange rules as well on a China set. For example, equipment such as lights and camera and sound kits are considered masculine. And therefore no females are allowed to set on things such as camera boxes or equipment cases. It's extremely stupid, obviously, but those are the traditions. There are also some nice things - at the beginning of every film production, the entire crew takes time to burn incense to pray for a safe and successful production. I find that doing such things together as a team is just really beautiful and especially seeing the way the crew takes it so seriously. In the end, it's still just camera and actors and the story.

Any plan for your next project?

We hope to do several projects in China. I always try to have a few in my pocket. But the most important one would be to bring my Sundance Institute project *Ten Thousand Happiness* to fruition. It's a personal project and something I've been developing for several years. Until that project is made, it will always be on the back of my mind.

I am also interested in another project where two young people fall in love and get pregnant, and before the baby is born, both families intervene and complicate what was originally a beautiful love.

For me, I write about what I'm interested in and what I'm dealing with personally at the moment. I feel that unless I can write them down and express the feeling, they will always be demons inside me looking for outlets.

BIOS

Johnny Ma (Writer/Director)

Johnny was born as Nan Ma, in Shanghai China, and immigrated to Toronto at age of ten.

After careers in mergers acquisition in the business and fashion world, Johnny first made the move to documentary filmmaking in 2008. Graduating from Columbia University's M.F.A. in the Directing / Screenwriting film program, Johnny's short films have screened at TIFF, Dallas International Film Festival, Aspen Shortfest and other international festivals, while receiving awards from DGA and National Board of Review as well a nomination for the Canadian Academy Awards.

Johnny is developing for his second feature project also set in China.. He is a recent alum of the 2014 Sundance Institute Screenwriting / Directing Lab and winner of the Telefilm Canada Pitch This competition.

Filmography

2011 - O Genio de Quintino (Short)

2013 - A Grand Canal (Short)

2016 - Old Stone

Ming Kai Leung (Director of Photography)

Ming Kai Leung earned his MFA in film from Columbia University in New York. He also attended Asian Film Academy organized by Busan International Film Festival, where he won the Best Performance Award as a cinematographer.

Ming Kai's feature debut as a cinematographer, Anocha Suwichakornpong's MUNDANE HISTORY, won the Tiger Award at International Film Festival Rotterdam, and the NETPAC Award at Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival. It also earned him an invitation to Plus Camerimage, the International Film Festival for the Art of Cinematography in Poland, where he competed with seven other talented cinematographers from around the world for best debut feature.

Over the years, Ming Kai has worked in many countries, including the United States, India, Thailand, Taiwan, Australia, the Philippines, Japan, Greece, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Ming Kai's recent cinematography efforts include MURMUR OF THE HEARTS, directed by Sylvia Chang, which was the opening film of Hong Kong International Film Festival. He also shot INVISIBLE SPACES, the first Georgian short film selected for the official competition at the Cannes Film Festival.

Chen Gang (Lao Shi)

Chen Gang is a veteran Chinese actor. He graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1987 and spent a few years in the U.K. before moving back to China to continue his acting career. Chen Gang is mostly seen in Chinese TV dramas. His notable work include the critically acclaimed TV drama JIU JIU GUI YI and the film FENG SHUI (dir. Wang Jing), where he plays a strong supporting role as a gangster. FENG SHUI was in competition in the 2012 Tokyo International Film Festival.

Nai An (Mao Mao)

Nai An is a Chinese independent producer and actress. She graduated from the Central Academy of Drama in 1991 and started to work as an independent producer in 1993. In 1997, she founded Dream Factory, where she produced award-winning films in collaboration with director Lou Ye, including SUZHOU RIVER, PURPLE BUTTERFLY, SUMMER PALACE, SPRING FEVER, LOVE AND BRUISES, MYSTERY and BLIND MASSAGE. Her works have been selected by the Cannes Film Festival, Berlin International Film Festival, Venice Film Festival and International Film Festival Rotterdam. SPRING FEVER was awarded Best Screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival and her most recent film, BLIND MASSAGE, won the Silver Bear for Outstanding Artistic Contribution- Camera in the Berlin International Film Festival and went on to win six prizes at the 51st Taipei Golden Horse Awards, including Best Film, Best Adapted Screenplay, Best Cinematography, Best Editing, Best Sound Design and Best New Performer.

Wang Hongwei (Captain)

Wang Hongwei is a Chinese actor perhaps best known for his work with director Jia Zhangke. The two men were classmates at the Beijing Film Academy when they began their professional relationship, with Wang starring in Jia's breakthrough short film XIAO SHAN GOING HOME in 1995. Since then, Wang has had roles in nearly all of Jia's films, including starring roles in Jia's debut XIAO WU and follow-up, PLATFORM.

OLD STONE

A FILM BY JOHNNY MA

CAST

CHEN Gang Lao Shi
NAI An Mao Mao
WANG Hongwei Captain
ZHANG Zebin Li Jiang
LUO Xue'er Xue'er

CREW

Written and Directed by Johnny MA
Produced by WU Xianjian, Chi-an LIN
Produced by Jing WANG, Sarah STALLARD
Executive Producer NAI An
Director of Photography Ming Kai LEUNG
Art Directors ZHENG Chen , ZHANG Xueqiang
Editor Mike LONG
Additional Editing by Daniel GARCIA
Sound Mixer SHENG Yong
Music by Lee SANDERS
Costume Designer LI Ke
Make-up Artist LI Hongyan
Casting Directors WANG Daomei, ZHANG Yanjia
1st Assistant Director LIU Yan Wen Jun
Sound Designer T Terressa TATE
Production Managers DENG Qing, LI Hua

China/Canada | 2016
80 minutes | DCP | Color | 1.85 | 5.1

A ZEITGEIST FILMS RELEASE

www.zeitgeistfilms.com