

The passion of Gan

Christian filmmaker Gan Xiao'er returns to his native village to depict the power of his faith

By Yenni Kwok



Photo: InD Blue

Guangzhou, the sprawling commercial hub of the Pearl River Delta, seems an unlikely adopted home for a film director. But it might be an auspicious base for Christian filmmaker Gan Xiao'er. After all, Canton, as the city was once known, was the first Chinese town visited by Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci in the 16th century when he sought to bring his faith to China.

One of the emerging talents in China's independent filmmaking scene, Gan makes films that are inspired by his religious beliefs. His second and latest feature, *Raised from Dust*, is set in a Christian community in a village in Henan province. It follows the tribulations of a young woman whose husband lies incapacitated in hospital. Xiaoli is not only burdened by mounting hospital bills, but she is also under pressure to pay the tuition fees for their nine-year-old daughter.

The story of financial hardship is not uncommon in rural China, where desperate situations have driven many people – women especially – to suicide. Yet, unlike the tragic end of these women, Xiaoli perseveres,

drawing strength from her Christian faith and support from her fellow church members.

“As far as Chinese cinema is concerned,” the 37-year-old director says, “there haven’t been any films that deal with this cultural phenomenon, this religious feeling while these things happen under everybody’s nose.”

It is estimated there are 80 to 130 million Christians in China – a figure that includes both Protestants and Catholics in official and underground churches. Indeed, the number has been growing fast in the last two or three decades.

Nonetheless, Gan isn’t much interested in preaching about the Gospel. “The most important thing is whether a person has something to hope for inside,” he says. “I think a religion, whether it is Christianity, Islam or others, has a major role because it tells us that in the eye of God, we are very precious.”

This underground film, made without permits, was shot in the director’s own home village in Henan. It uses mainly non-professional actors, with many village folks playing themselves. One of them, known as Brother Lü, is a hooligan-turned-church elder. During his wild youth in the 1980s, he was into fighting, gambling and visiting prostitutes. Despite his track record, he was once trusted to collect electricity bills in the village.

“But instead of turning over the money to the electricity bureau,” Gan laughs, “he spent it in a singing and dancing bar, causing a black-out in the whole village. Who would have thought that he would later become a believer?”

The story of the dying husband and his loyal wife was inspired by the true account of Gan’s own parents. “My father suffered from a liver disease for 17 years, and my mother never lost hope,” Gan recalls. “But in the end, due to various complications – liver cancer, ascites and kidney failure, he couldn’t eat and urinate. His internal organs were failing.”

Like the couple in the film, his parents prayed and sang hymns together. “Then, one night, my mom said a prayer for my dad: ‘Dear Heavenly Father, if his mission in the human world is accomplished, please take him away. I will entrust him to you.’”

Gan says this moment, shortly before his father’s death in 1997, was a turning point in his life. “I made up my mind to believe,” he says. “My

mother's words showed such warm consideration, a profound meaning of love."

A man with a calm, quiet demeanor, Gan was born in a village in Henan, where 15 per cent of the population is Christian. His parents were both teachers and devout Christians. (His parents' *guanxi* turned out to be useful in shooting *Raised from Dust*. One of his father's students is an influential local official, and his mother has good connections with the church). Like many people from impoverished Henan, Gan went elsewhere for study and work. He attended the Beijing Film Academy, graduated in 1998, and is now teaching at a university in Guangzhou.

Gan's works show that independent films have blossomed beyond the major centres of Beijing and Shanghai. His debut feature, *The Only Sons*, was shot in a remote village in Guangdong and earned much critical acclaim when it was screened at international film festivals in Rotterdam and Vancouver. A wrenching account of poverty and spiritual salvation in a farming village in southern China, *The Only Sons* has been praised as "one of the most exciting discoveries in Chinese cinema of the last few years," by the French critic Bérénice Reynaud during the 2003 Vancouver International Film Festival.

However, the situation depicted in the films, whereby Christians are relatively free to observe their faith, is a stark contrast to reports of religious repression in China. While acknowledging such problems still occur, Gan believes an even bigger problem lies within the Christian community itself.

"The house churches and the official churches cannot forgive each other," he says. "In my native village, this problem is not very severe because the number of Christians attending the church ceremony is very small. My mother goes to the official church, and this goes without saying. The vast majority of the people, once they want something from God, that's where they turn to."

Because of its underground nature, *Raised from Dust* has only been shown in private screenings in a few cities in the mainland. But Gan wants to show it to a wider audience. He plans to go to different churches in the countryside, including the one where they did the shooting, to show the film and make a documentary about people's reaction.

"We all know that, for example, a person like Xiao Wu [the titular character in Jia Zhangke's first film that features a hapless pickpocket] is

surely not the type of person who would go to watch the film *Xiao Wu*,” Gan says. “This means the film doesn’t reach the people it is concerned about. This is really a pity.”

In the next few years, Gan has several future projects with his production company, the Seventh Seal Film Workshop (the homage to both his religion and Ingmar Bergman is telling). “My dream is to direct seven feature films that form a set of Seven Seals,” he says. “They would all deal with the spiritual life of Chinese people. The goal, however, is not to spread the Gospel, but rather to depict the state of the Gospel in China.”

The Only Sons and *Raised from Dust* are the first two. The scripts of the remaining five are still in the making, but Gan knows what their titles will be: *Waiting for God*, *Fear and Trembling* (which is also the title of Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard’s seminal work), *To the Ends of the Earth*, *Going to Jerusalem* and *Before the Clarion*.

Apart from that, Gan has one simple wish. “I am praying that if God wants me to leave this world, I hope it will be after the Seven Seals are complete.”

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