



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
2024 OFFICIAL SELECTION
SPECIAL SCREENING



AN UNFINISHED FILM by Lou Ye

Cast

Starring **Qin Hao** as **Jiang Cheng**, **Mao Xiaorui** as **Director Xiaorui**, **Qi Xi** as **Sang Qi**

Co-starring **Huang Xuan** as **Ye Xiao**, **Liang Ming** as **Ah-Jian**, **Zhang Songwen** as **Tang**, **Youyou** as **Paopao**

Crew

Director: **Lou Ye**

Writers: **Lou Ye, Yingli Ma**

Producers: **Philippe Bober, Yingli Ma**

Line Producer: **Xu Le**

Director of Photography: **Zeng Jian**

Editor: **Tian Jiaming**

Costume Design: **Yang Yang**

Casting Director: **Zhang Rong**

Production Design: **Zhong Cheng**

Hair & Make-Up: **Zhe Yan**

Sound Designer: **Fu Kang**

Re-Recording Mixer: **Fu Kang, Tan Ailong**

VFX Supervisor: **Wang Lei**

Production

Yingfilms Pte. Ltd.

Essential Films

ZDF/ARTE

Cinema Inutile

Teamfun International GmbH

Gold Rush Pictures

Conversation with the director conducted by Wang Muyan, May 2024



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by Lou Ye

Singapore, Germany | 2024 | 2K | 16:9 | 5.1 | 107 min | Chinese



Logline

January 2020. A film crew reunites near Wuhan to resume the shooting of a film halted ten years earlier, only to share the unexpected challenges as cities are placed under lockdown.

Synopsis

Director Xiaorui convinces his cast and crew to resume the shooting of a film halted ten years earlier. In January 2020, with the shoot almost complete, rumours regarding an illness begin to circulate. A hairdresser from Wuhan is sent home, while the crew follows the news on their phones. The director has to decide whether to halt the filming once again. Some of the crew and actors manage to leave before the hotel is locked down by security guards and everyone left on set is confined to their hotel rooms. As all communication is reduced to phone screens, Wuhan is locked down. The crew continues to communicate via video calls, whilst the quarantined main actor Jiang Cheng struggles to support his wife who is now locked-down with their month-old baby in Beijing.



A Conversation with Lou Ye

Let's make a long story short. There has been talk of a sequel to your previous film, *SPRING FEVER* (Best Screenplay, Cannes 2009), and now we have a film shot at a hotel during the pandemic. So what exactly is this "An Unfinished Film"?

Actually, the "sequel" is an experimental version of yet another film (laughs), which is not yet finished, and I'm not sure what kind of film it will eventually be. There will also be some material from the past, like what you see in *AN UNFINISHED FILM*.

Why did you use these scenes and the documentary material from past films?

Just like the beginning of the film, which is a real mobile phone video from the time, it was because we opened an old computer and found all kinds of film footage from more than ten years ago.

How did you feel when you looked at this footage from the past?

It still looked pretty good to me, and it's satisfying to watch it again now. The earlier material consists mainly of outtakes and on-set documentary footage from *SOUZHOU RIVER* (2000), *SPRING FEVER* (2009), *MYSTERY* (2012) and *THE SHADOW PLAY* (2018).

The part from the *SPRING FEVER* footage where Ah-Jian and Ye Xiao are laughing in bed is actually one of the rehearsals where the camera was recording the whole time. But it's so beautiful and



so real. People will always long for that which is real. In the final version of SPRING FEVER, however, the story of these two characters had been completely cut out.

We also see a lot of unseen footage of Qin Hao, mainly from SPRING FEVER, but also from other films of yours.

It's quite a coincidence; in different films of mine, Qin Hao played many roles from different social classes. When I look back, the impact was huge: I felt that his portrayal of different fictional roles in the various films reflected the changes in China over the past decade or so. This led to a desire to make a new film which would be based on old footage but star Qin Hao. Then the pandemic happened. At the beginning I was stuck in Japan, so the initial work of collecting

the old footage had to be paused. With other projects happening simultaneously, I could only continue in my spare time. Eventually, this film deviated from the original plan, and now it's more about people making films during the pandemic.

In much of the documentary footage at the beginning of the film and in the subsequent “film within a film”, everyone in the crew is actually playing themselves. Why did you choose to replace the director, yourself, with an actor?

Maybe I have a preconception that you can't act if you're directing because you can't do both simultaneously and do them both right. I'm also uncomfortable looking at myself in images. And it was also a consideration for me to keep this project somewhat fictionalised. To be completely

documentary would've been to be stuck in the framework of another “language”, which is not an easy thing to deal with. Therefore, I thought being semi-fictional would make the film freer. However, the relationship between the director and the actors in the film does indeed resemble our relationship in real life.

The second part of the film, in which the film shoot is interrupted by the lockdown, involved completing the shoot during the pandemic and fully incorporating this into the film. Was this shot according to the original plan?

We made a shooting plan based on the editing of the old material. The short-term shoot during the hotel quarantine was similar to a traditional film production with written shooting outlines and

camera placement diagrams, but the later shoot was different, as the roles of the crew were twofold; they played their roles both in front of and behind the camera. They are making a film while also filming themselves making a film.

What was the shooting situation like on set?

We had an ARRI camera and four or five DV cameras. Occasionally, you can see the director of photography, Zeng Jian, carrying a camera, because as soon as he gets out of frame he has to keep shooting. This was always happening to him (laughs). Everyone was very excited. For example, in the film when Zeng Jian goes to talk to the lighting crew (who are the actual lighting crew), we can see someone holding a microphone next to them. This person is in fact the boom operator.



We had simple walk-through rehearsals, and in the end all the footage in the project was usable except for that in which I could be seen. Due to the fact that we had five or six cameras on set at the same time, there was a real possibility that I could be shot while I was directing the actors or tweaking the mise-en-scène. But as long as you couldn't see my face, the footage could be used; otherwise we needed to reshoot straight away with Mao Xiaorui, who plays the director.

Was there a lot of improvisation during the shoot?

There was constant improvisation and modification. The so-called script contained only a very small part of what was filmed. We also had the real-time video call scenes, which were actual video calls, so there were many technical issues that needed

to be resolved. The uncertainty of the pandemic left me with the feeling that things were evolving at a pace with which the project was not able to keep up. Coupled with the large amount of footage accumulated due to the multi-camera shoot, I ended up giving my colleagues reference films for the editing, which were MAN OF MARBLE (1977) and ROME OPEN CITY (1945). Both of these films gave me this same feeling.

It's your most liberating film. During our call over two years ago, you were thinking about some of the technical issues involved in the film. For example, how a vertical mobile phone screen would fit properly into the film, which you said was a problem of technique, not a problem of cinematic language.

I enjoyed the freedom in solving this problem. And

actually, the things that we were most worried about at the beginning turned out to be completely fine in the end. After finishing the shooting script for the film, the first thing we did was test how different forms of mobile phone footage looked on a big screen. We experimented a lot in order to avoid visual discomfort.

The solution after the experiments was to incorporate the vertical screen as part of the shot and to try to use it as little as possible as the only image in the frame.

The visual effect of the vertical screen combined with the sense of confinement of the quarantine was conveyed as a visual concept. The vertical screen and the split screens were able to form part of this project because they really worked; they became

part of the visual language. AN UNFINISHED FILM is a cinematic journey that explores the connections between us and the digital interfaces that envelop our lives.

Not only did you integrate phone screens into the film, but you also effectively transformed real-time video calls into a primary tool for cinematic narratives.

I was influenced, perhaps subconsciously, by the prevalence of video communication during the pandemic, and I wanted this film to reflect that, especially visually. This had a huge impact on me at the time. The main shooting process saw almost all tasks being carried out through video: pre-production and casting were all done virtually. It truly altered our visual paradigm, in terms of image,

and our relationship with it, since film is a reflection of our reality. Cinema must therefore progress and create a new visual language that mirrors this reality and challenges traditional filmmaking. The desire to finish a film that was not completed ten years ago was totally subverted by the pandemic, followed by the visual system and the concept of cinema being subverted as well; this was the procedure of this film.

The abrupt sense of disruption due to the pandemic, which altered life and work, is strongly reflected in the contrast within the film. The pandemic era is inherently one of video calls, an era of virtual connectivity.

During this time, life was completely digitised. When it came to editing the film afterwards, we discussed how the film begins in a traditional way, only to

evolve into an "anti-film". The pandemic-induced isolation altered people's circumstances and living environments, consequently impacting the image. In the film, it wasn't until the film crew was confined to the hotel that we started using split screens, thus subverting the visual system. This was unimaginable for me, yet it really happened.

It did happen, but at the same time it was also a conscious creative act for you as a director to bring it into the film.

Because it really did change the cinematic language. For example, the voice-over in traditional filmmaking turned into voice messages, and even the simplest things change, like how we watch the screen either vertically or horizontally. All media and modes of recording underwent functional changes. Perhaps

what we are facing now is the turning point.

Going a step further: the pandemic was only an accelerator for this change – a very intense one, yet it wasn't the original cause. Vertical phone screens, which provide a new way of watching, are “anti-film”, but have been popular for many years already.

Yes. It can definitely be traced back to earlier times. And it is actually a process of confrontation: one between films and these “interfaces”, the various interfaces in life. This tug-of-war has been going on for many years. The pandemic just made it clearer.

And gave it the legitimacy to be used in films.

From the perspective of cinematic language, we

weren't trying to confront this problem before the pandemic; we were just putting it to one side. But whilst making this film, we could no longer avoid it. At the time, we didn't know whether it would work, which is why I say the film is particularly experimental. The essence of the emergence of “anti-film” lies in the increasing gap between traditional film logic and people's life logic.

The lead actress in this film completed her performance at home through a mobile phone.

Qi Xi, who plays Sang Qi, had just had a baby at the time of filming, and was at home taking care of the child while working on the film. We incorporated this reality into the film. The cinematographer provided her with a work phone, which functioned as a self-operated camera. The production department



saved all her photos to this phone. For the sound component, we had a team of three crew members in her home who were responsible for recording her during video calls. This decision also serves as a response to the reality of the present era: social media has become a technological substitute for interpersonal communication, and we now spend most of our time interacting digitally. Simultaneously, we have also become the images on the interfaces of others, surrounded by various windows and screens, and captured by numerous cameras.

When videos from the internet, for example from TikTok, appear on screen, it makes one think that this film might also be a response to the question of how to make a film in the era of short videos.

The function of the short videos in the film is

similar to what I did in my previous films, in which I showed the passing of time by mixing in news and documentary footage. In this film, we use symbolic footage documenting key moments during the pandemic in China that circulated the internet at the time. This includes videos of the lockdown in Wuhan and commemorations for the whistle-blower Li Wenliang.

Similar to the footage in SUMMER PALACE (2006), accompanied by the rock song “Don’t Break My Heart”. Are short videos from the internet our era’s equivalent of news documentaries?

(Laughs), yes. Most of the material was shot by us, but it was edited in the style of short videos. The soundtrack was also completely turned into internet pop songs. Video clips have disrupted our traditional

language systems. Our lives are now completely immersed in interfaces and cinematic experiences. Short videos simply respond to this reality. Cinema, too, should find its unique response.

The director in the film asks all the quarantined actors to record their lives on their phones. During the lockdown, was leaving records in this way also a kind of resistance to such an unfree life?

When faced with events beyond our control, at a time when we didn’t know what would happen the next day, recording became the only thing we could do – no matter whether we were filmmakers or not. Particularly when you’re not allowed to document others, perhaps all that one can do is document their own life, which is why Jiang Cheng’s part of the film ends with his selfie. By filming, one can achieve a

certain level of equality and can strive for dignity. This was the case for all filmmakers during this time: if we cannot film others, then we can only film ourselves. But if one goes further back, there will be no more images.

In the film, by using the voice-over – “no one could have expected what would happen next” – and a montage of internet videos, time is quickly shifted from early 2020 to early 2023. Why do you cover the last three years at such a fast pace?

Without these three years, the film would no longer be a narrative about the pandemic in China. They are indispensable. It is also a factual narrative that I have to respect.



Why did you ultimately choose “An Unfinished Film” as the title?

Perhaps it makes the edited version clearer and easier for the audience to understand: it’s simply an unfinished “film within a film”. The ending of the film is a work screening for the team, and what they see is no longer the film that the director imagined. And we don’t know what will happen after the film ends; it’s completely unclear. Perhaps we will know by continuing to work hard. This is also a kind of subversion of traditional filmmaking: it is easy to understand that given the fact that our lives have already been subverted, subverting films has become a very normal thing, and subversion itself is no longer important.

So the purpose of this film is to leave behind “evidence”; an archive, a fictional archive.

Only in part; cinema can only be so reliable. The completion of the film actually makes me feel relieved, as it shows that cinema can indeed contain such subversion. From the perspective of the experimentation with cinematic language, my conclusion is: “Film will not die!” The film is evidence of that.

So under what circumstances and at what point do you think this “unfinished” film can be finished?

When the pandemic ended completely, I personally felt that this film could come to an end. It was a very clear feeling. Before that, I had no idea how to conclude the film. Subconsciously, I wanted to break

free from the shadow of the pandemic, which was also an important factor. Completing the film was a very comforting thing for me and for the crew. In the end, the most important thing was for the film to record the reality of these years and the emotions it gave to us filmmakers. After watching the film, the entire team unanimously agreed that we did what needed to be done: make a free film shot in unfree times.

Just like Jiang Cheng/Qin Hao asks at the beginning of the film when faced with the director's invitation: "If others cannot see it, then what's the point?" Even though the film was a joint production between Singapore and Germany, which allowed you to concentrate on the film without worrying about Chinese censorship, it remains completely impossible that the film will be released in China.

Completing this film can be considered an achievement in itself. As for what's left, I don't know. But we will see. I am optimistic.





Lou Ye

Lou Ye was born to a theatrical family in Shanghai in 1965. He spent his childhood in theatres and studied at Shanghai School of Fine Arts before working as an animator at Shanghai Animation Studio. He graduated from Beijing Film Academy in 1989, majoring in directing. His films have been selected by all the major international festivals (Cannes, Venice, Berlin, Taipei Golden Horse Awards, Chinese Independent Film Festival, Asian Film Awards) and awarded various prizes.

Filmography

SUZHOU RIVER (1999)
PURPLE BUTTERFLY (2003)
SUMMER PALACE (2006)
SPRING FEVER (2009)
LOVE AND BRUISES (2011)
MYSTERY (2012)
BLIND MESSAGE (2014)
THE SHADOW PLAY (2019)
SATURDAY FICTION (2019)
NEW FILMS (UNTITLED) (Post-production, 2024)



Qin Hao

Qin Hao graduated from the Central Academy of Drama. He has starred in films that have premiered at Cannes, Berlin, and Venice including **SPRING FEVER**, **BLIND MESSAGE**, **SHANGHAI DREAMS** and **CHONGQING BLUES**. He has also appeared in popular television dramas including **THE BAD KIDS** and **THE LONG SEASON**, confirming his status as one of China's most recognized actors.

Qi Xi

Qi Xi graduated from the Central Academy of Drama. In 2012, she starred in Lou Ye's film **MYSTERY**, her performance earned her the Best New Performer Award at the Golden Horse Awards, the Best Newcomer Award at the Asian Film Awards. In 2019, Qi Xi starred in **SO LONG, MY SON** by Wang Xiaoshuai which premiered in Competition at the Berlinale. In 2020, she starred in **THE CALMING** produced by Jia Zhangke and directed by Song Fang, which premiered in Forum at the Berlinale, winning the CICAIE Art Cinema Award.





Yingli Ma

Yingli Ma graduated from German Film Academy Berlin (DFFB). In 1996, she wrote and directed the feature film **DAYS OF MIANDI**. Later, she started working with director Lou Ye, as co-writer of **SUMMER PALACE, THE SHADOW PLAY**; writer of **BLIND MESSAGE**, and producer/writer of **SATURDAY FICTION**. In 2018, Yingli Ma produced and directed **A DOCUMENTARY ON THE SHADOW PLAY**. Her works have been selected by many major international festivals: Munich, Venice, the Berlinale, Taipei Golden Horse Awards, and awarded numerous prizes.

Philippe Bober

Essential Filmproduktion and Coproduction Office's founder Philippe Bober has produced forty-one films to date, with thirteen playing in competition in Cannes. "The auteurs I work with have the most personal, original ideas and working methods. As a producer, I support them in pushing the borders of cinematic language, while managing to engage audiences," he notes. Bober maintains long-lasting and productive relationships with auteurs, many of whose films have won major awards in Cannes, Venice or Berlin.





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