

IN CONVERSATION by Thomas Podvin

the third eye

French filmmaker Sylvie Levey documents the real Shanghai

Shanghai, *Waiting for Paradise* (SWFP) 方浜路的等待 is French journalist/filmmaker Sylvie Levey's latest exposé of the lives of ordinary people in modern Shanghai. Shot between 2001 and 2006, the 92-minute documentary follows three generations of Chinese living under the same roof in a small apartment on Fangbang Road in Huangpu district. During this period, the family awaits relocation to a new home as their neighborhood faces demolition. It's this long wait – five years – during which their dreams for a new start clash with harsh urban reality.

Born in the fishing port of Saint-Malo on the northern coast of Brittany, Levey's interest in China began at the age of 10, after reading Pearl Buck's novel *East Wind, West Wind*. Since arriving in Shanghai in 1999, she's made a series of documentaries on subjects that few foreigners ever experience, including the one-child policy (*The Golden Babies*, 1999), transsexuality (*The Unique Destiny of Colonel Jin Xing*, 2001) and the women's penal system (*High Crimes in Shanghai*, 2005).

SWFP is as intimate as a reality TV show, though it replaces voyeurism with a distinctly humanist point of view. Mixing laughter with tears, and hope with outrage, the film portrays a range of emotions that are as big as life itself. As the camera follows the daily routine of the Wang family before their relocation to a Shanghai suburb, the viewer is treated to a

wholly unique work: at times heart-rending, at times comical, a warts and all portrait of an ordinary Chinese family. In the end what emerges is a distinctly Chinese tale, but one that transcends cultural and language differences with its universal appeal.

Despite the difficult topics Levey's tackled, all her work is made with the consent of local authorities. Fluent in Chinese (she studied Mandarin Chinese in Paris and Taipei), she works without an interpreter to increase the intimacy and understanding she has with her subjects.

Known as 'Le Shiwei', Levey has been called the "third eye watching China" (第三只眼看中国). As an outsider looking at the Middle Kingdom, that third eye has won her multiple awards overseas; the only market where her films are shown.

In our interview at her richly decorated apartment in the former French Concession, Levey discusses how China appears through her camera viewfinder.

that's: When you arrived in Shanghai in 1999, did the reality match your dreams?

Sylvie Levey (SL): China is always full of surprises. Everything is possible and nothing is impossible. That is what I love about it. But if people come with preconceived ideas, if they seek their imaginary view of China, they won't find the real China or real people. The key to understanding China is modesty; by being

FEATUURES FEATUURES FEATUURES FEATUURES



modest you can get as close as possible to the essence of China and its people. What's more, Chinese respect hard work, courage and dignity; if they feel you have respect for those qualities, then they will appreciate your love of their country. Of course, if you can speak their language, use their sayings and idioms – even with mistakes, they'll love you even more.

that's: How does your approach to your work differ from that of other foreign journalists?

SL: I am idealistic and ultra sensitive. I make documentaries from my guts. In most of my work the point of view is subjective, the opposite of what's taught in journalism schools. I don't believe in objectivity at all, which for me is meaningless and dull. Subjectivity is my primary interest; the time and money spent on my work is secondary.

that's: In SWFP, this subjectivity is even more manifest than in your previous films.

SL: That's because the subjects of this film, the Wang family, are my friends. I shot the film without using a third party, so my relationship with them was direct. I was like a member of their family, and that's why the film is so strongly subjective: their view became my view. Initially, I thought about having a Chinese friend handle the camera for me, but I gave up on the idea. It wouldn't have worked with a Chinese outsider.

I was looking for a direct approach because Chinese don't speak to other Chinese in the same way they do with Westerners. We are from the outside; we are *lao wai*. What's more, my film will be shown overseas and not on Chinese television; that was one of the Wangs' conditions before they agreed to be filmed.

that's: You made this film over many years. How could you be sure that you wouldn't miss key moments in the lives of the Wangs?

SL: I always carried a small camera and eventually they became used to it. In the beginning, however, nothing really happened on film. The initial approach was modest; none of us knew where the story would take us. We had some ideas, of course, but fortunately life is unpredictable and so are people.

that's: In the end, what does your film tell us about Shanghai?

SL: Actually, this film takes the pulse of the city by looking inside the heads of its ordinary Chinese residents. It is a modest attempt to look into the modern Chinese psyche and how it has been affected by what is, at times, overwhelming change. In fact, few works have ever attempted this point of view, with the possible exception of *Four Generations under One Roof* 四世同堂, by the famous Beijing novelist Lao She 老舍.

that's: There's one sequence near the beginning of the film where the Wangs are watching a news broadcast of the 9/11

“ Chinese respect hard work, courage and dignity; if they feel you have respect for those qualities, then they will appreciate your love of their country. ”

attack and making comments that some viewers may find shocking.

SL: It is not for me to judge their comments; my role was to observe. [What they said] was what they thought at the time. I admit I was very surprised by what they said, and there is indeed a risk that some viewers will be offended. Too bad for them. My films are not made to please Western audiences; if they were I'd be making reality TV shows. I'd also be richer, and would own a car and a flat.

In the West, there are two caricatures of China: one as an ultra-liberal market where we can make billions. That image, of course, has no human face. The second portrays China as a gray zone for human rights.

In my film, I didn't want to follow these stereotypes even though my *raison d'être* as a filmmaker is to work on the edge. What I wanted to do with this film was to introduce the Wang family and China to the West. Like the films of Jia Zhangke and Yasujiro Ozu, I want to tell stories that have universal appeal, the sort of appeal that allows the viewer to sympathize with the characters.

My brother Christian, who's neither into my films nor into China, watched my documentary and said he could identify with the Wangs as fellow human beings and as friends.

that's: There are echoes in your film of Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*, which also deals with destruction and relocation.

SL: When I watched *Still Life* in a Paris theater, I was struck by how his actors act out the lives of ordinary people on screen. It reminded me that my characters are also actors in their own lives. Jia's films blend cinema and documentary, fiction and reality. I love his work because it has a humanistic dimension; it's not propaganda. His characters are human and their story is powerful. He shows China as it is today.

that's: In your film you followed the story of the Wangs between 2001 and 2006. In the end you produced 180 hours of footage.

SL: Yes, it was crazy and very expensive

to produce and then edit 180 hours of film, but I have no regrets. During the years of filming, I was permanently ready. Sometimes I captured nothing and other times I found magic: poetry, misfortune, anger and smiles. Clearly, this took a lot of patience, but it was both necessary and worthwhile. Of the 180 hours of film much was left in the editing room.

For example, I spent a lot of time shooting the pavement stones in the courtyard, and the doors, corridors, etc. I could have produced a 60-minute silent film on Old Shanghai streets. At times, I was obsessed with these streets and even dreamed of finding a millionaire to rescue them from demolition. Of course, these scenes did not make the final cut.

that's: In one scene in your film, a passerby stops, looks directly into your camera and scolds you for filming common people in a poor neighborhood. He thinks you should be showing modern China to the world, and he has a good point. Many Westerners only want to see the old China, which they see as colorful and exotic despite the poverty.

SL: There is no misery in my films, but it's true that some viewers do expect what might be termed a sensationalist view of China. A friend of mine, Li Xiao from the Shanghai Media Group (SMG), once told me that he went to a festival in France where an amateur Chinese filmmaker presented a film on the killing of a pig. It was horrible; the pig was purposely slaughtered slowly to produce a reaction from the viewer. My friend felt nauseous, but the film attracted a big audience who wanted to reinforce their stereotyped view of Chinese as a cruel people. However, my films will not appeal to these people; for me, dignity and respect are important.

that's: What's next?

SL: I'm working on two projects. One is in Beijing the other in Shanghai. I don't want to say too much right now, but one of them is a personal project about the Chinese television industry, in particular CCTV. ■

SWFP premiered at the Istanbul International 1001 Documentary Film festival in October 2007. For more information visit www.sylvielevy.com.