

Song of Silence: Filmart Review

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The Bottom Line

A quietly moving if not cutting-edge family drama a welcome narrative change from China.

Venue

Hong Kong Filmart 2012

Cast

Li Qiang, Ying Yaning, Wu Bingbin, Yu Xuan

Director-screenwriter

Chen Zhuo

Chen Zhuo's semi-autobiographical drama about the uneasy bonds of family and rediscovering personal humanity, is a welcome breath of fresh air.

It is the rare Mainland film these days that does not pivot on a provincial laborer forcing his girlfriend into prostitution in the big city or disenfranchised youth overwhelmed by the rapidly changing country. And so, **Chen Zhuo's** *Song of Silence*, a naturalistic and semi-autobiographical drama about the uneasy bonds of family and rediscovering personal humanity, is a welcome breath of fresh air. Asian-focused festivals looking for something vaguely fresh from China should be drawn to the film, though any theatrical audience will be limited to the art house crowd, predominantly in Asia-Pacific.

Teenaged Xiao Jing (**Yin Yanning**) lives in a tucked away town in Hunan Province, isolated by both geography and her deafness. Her only real emotional connection is with her uncle, an artist that she occasionally poses for. That slightly awkward hobby gives rise to a minor scandal involving the uncle, which results in Jing being packed off to the city to live with her resentful father, cop Haoyang (**Li Qiang**). Rounding out the makeshift family is Haoyang's pregnant girlfriend Xiao Mei (**Wu Bingbin**), an aspiring rock star. Though the couple is far from welcoming, the fragile family slowly gels, with Jing and Mei eventually finding a comfortable middle ground when Mei proves something of a peer for Jing, and Jing proves not to be a brat. But it's a Chinese drama, which means there's an inevitable tragedy to deal with that repositions the minor scandal with the uncle as a much bigger one, but also forces Haoyang to finally display a semblance of fatherly behavior.

Director and co-writer Chen has a relatively delicate touch, and manages to keep what could be lurid elements from informing the characters and the story. It's a credit to Li, Ying and Wu's performances, particularly Li as a man stuck on the outside looking in as his girlfriend and daughter form a bond he's not privy to; it would be easy to give in to the temptation to take Haoyang into despicable monster-father territory. Instead he's an average man with divergent wants and desires that makes Jing an obstacle in his eyes. Mei is a character that is traditionally a shrieking caricature whose self-interest often comes across as grating petulance (ambitious women are still punished for that in Asian cinema). Instead, she remains empathetic as an understandably motivated woman terrified of getting trapped in a Podunk town. Blessedly there are no teenaged histrionics from Jing, and her understated melancholy is always palpable but never reliant on Major Acting.

Song of Silence has a muted tone and pace that suggests domestic disquiet beneath the surface, which is helped along by cinematographer **Shi Yue**'s unfussy camera work. Shi and Chen allow the story to unfold organically, with Haoyang and Mei at the center of a personal journey to reconnect with their humanity. In some ways Jing is simply a foil, the catalyst that compels both to stop and prioritize that which they'd recently devalued. There's nothing particularly cutting-edge about Chen's use of space or startlingly novel imagery, but *Song of Silence* is ultimately a strong debut that explores an aspect of contemporary Chinese life that speaks to audiences outside the country's borders.

Production companies: Beijing Tiger Entertainment & Media Co. Ltd., Harvest Films Production Co. Ltd

Sales: Harvest Films Production Co. Ltd.

Producer: Lai Yifan

Director: Chen Zhuo

Cast: Li Qiang, Ying Yanning, Wu Bingbin, Yu Xuan

Screenwriter: Chen Zhuo, Sung Yankui, Chen Haoyang

Executive producer: Chen Zhuo, Wang Chong

Director of Photography: Shi Yue

Production Designer: Zheng Xiaodi, Yan Ye

Music: Jiang Anqing

Links:

[1] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/filmart-love-in-the-buff-daily-301485>

[2] <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/filmart-2012-hong-kong-301369>