

Cultural Review

Decency as Redemptive:

A Review of Li Yang's *Blind Shaft*

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Blind Shaft (2003, 92 mins.) written, produced and directed by Li Yang. Adapted from the novel "Sacred Wood" by Liu Qingbang. Director of Photography: Liu Yonghong. Principal cast: Song (Li Yixiang), Tang (Wang Shuangbao), Yuan (Wang Baoqiang). China/Germany/Hong Kong. In Mandarin Chinese with English subtitles. A Kino International Release.

In the past twenty years, China has undergone rapid economic changes, marked by privatization and market reforms. Shot entirely in China, documentary filmmaker Li Yang's first feature, *Blind Shaft*, is an unblinking look at the underside of these reforms in terms of human suffering and

costs.¹ For foreign viewers, this is not China as economic miracle, confidently striding into modernity. This is another China—beyond the coastal cities dotted with Starbucks, McDonalds, shining skyscrapers and the cyberspace inhabited by 80 million Internet users wired to the world. Although the film garnered a host of prestigious international awards following its release,² it may be some time before it can be publicly shown inside China.

The narrative centers on two itinerant mine workers, Song Jinming and Tang Zhaoyang, who murder fellow-workers in a scam to extort money from mine owners. Facing financial pressures to support their families, willing to do anything to survive, these two men are cynical guides across a devastated human landscape. The film opens in silence and complete blackness, with a few production credits in red Chinese characters. Then the opening shot of men emerging out of a doorway stepping into the blue light of morning. Against the spare

sounds of a dog barking in the distance and boots crunching on dirt, the camera tracks the line of men as they move through the "safety" check before being handed their equipment. Song, Tang and a third man move into a frame and are sharing a cigarette. Men emerge out of the dark mine pit and Song, Tang and the third man replace them and begin their descent. The camera suddenly shifts perspective and the viewer is now watching the square of light at the top of the mine opening get smaller and smaller as the title credit appears—*Mang Jing*—Blind Shaft—in large, bold red characters.

The world we have entered is almost pitch black, with only the lights of the miners' hardhats eerily lighting faces, their bodies disappearing into the darkness. The men address each other as "brother" and are engaged in light banter during a rest break when Tang asks the third man, "Are you homesick?" There is a dangerous edge in his voice. The man does not seem to



Tang Zhaoyang and Song Jinming confer over their future. Photo: Kino International

hear it. Tang continues, “Hey, want to go home? I’ll send you back home.” The man replies, “You wouldn’t trick me, would you?” Tang replies, moving closer, “Why would I?” There is the sound of an iron pickaxe dragging across the mine bottom and the man is hit from behind and falls forward. Back on the surface, an alarm is sounded as men run across to the opening where a shaft slide has been triggered below. The show of false grief for one’s dead “relative,” the negotiations for compensation, the mine boss’s calculations over whether to kill the two of them or pay up and how much, now begin in earnest. The boss offers Tang 30,000 *yuan* (\$4,000) because that is cheaper than the hefty cut his police chief pals would demand if the two men were killed. Tang takes the money, and as they move on to their next scam he throws the cremated remains of his “relative” onto a garbage heap.

The bleakness of this world is both literal and spiritual. Across a gray barren landscape of hard, beaten-down dirt, the narrative unfolds to depict a morally bankrupt social order marked by cynicism, murderous self-interest and calculated interpersonal relations. Nothing is quite as it seems and everything can be faked—identity cards, passports, familial relationships, friendship. Tang declares at one point, “Now only a mom’s feelings for her kids aren’t faked.”

Without any artifice, stepping into the void of a disappeared father (possibly one of the murder victims of Tang and Song) to support his sister and his mother, a 16-year-old boy, Yuan Fengming, embodies another moral center. In an open square, Tang first spots Yuan Fengming, his narrowed eyes marking the boy as the next scam victim. Tang stalks him and strikes up a conversation, playing upon the boy’s need to find work and his trust in others. The story’s resulting moral and psychological tension is shaped by the shifting negotiations among this odd triangle of Yuan Fengming, innocently carrying his values of filial piety, respect for his elders and faith in a future; Song, now adopting the role of the boy’s “uncle” while finding his level of comfort with murder slowly eroded by the boy’s simple decency and innocence; and Tang, a lost, murderous soul. Even in this world a code of behavior is invoked; even murderers, it seems, have codes to live and kill by:

Song argues the boy cannot die a virgin; the boy cannot die without his first drink.

And yet, there is a glimmer of hope: despite Song’s gruff rebuffs, the boy is slowly humanized in his eyes through his sharing of a family photo, his focus on making enough money to pay for his little sister’s school tuition, his own aspirations to go back to school and his determination to find his missing father. The resemblance of the boy’s father in the photo with the last man Tang and Song murdered, the possibility that the boy’s murder would end his family line and Song’s clear concern for his own son back home—all of these also begin nagging at Song’s conscience. When Yuan Fengming asks to borrow some money from Song to give to a young beggar raising money for his school tuition in the market, Song also throws some money into the boy’s bowl. Tang walks away muttering that the high school acceptance certificate displayed is probably false. The alliances shift imperceptibly.

Woven throughout this story are critiques of the authorities and the rampant greed and disregard for human life their bankrupt stewardship has engendered. The mine boss’s reaction to the first “cave-in” and possible injuries and deaths is a reflection of the Chinese authorities’ reactions to disasters. He orders the immediate blocking of the exits to the outside world to prevent any information from getting out, and later orders the immediate cremation of the bodies to destroy evidence, echoing the Chinese government’s approaches to the HIV/AIDS and SARS health crises.

There are pokes at socialism. At a karaoke bar, Tang insists on singing “Long Live Socialism,” recalling that he was in the front row when they sang this years ago: *The socialist countries are on top—the reactionaries are overthrown, the imperialists run away with their tails between their legs.* But two young prostitutes laugh and say the words have changed: *The reactionaries were never overthrown; the capitalists came back with their US dollars, liberating all of China, bringing the sexual climax of socialism.* The men laugh, sing along drunkenly, new words to an old song.

Although set primarily in the coal mines, the film also powerfully presents China’s hundreds of millions of displaced farmers, unemployed factory workers, migrants, young women driven to sex work and other

groups discarded in the reform calculus. Standing around in the cold winter light desperate for work, they squat in public squares with signs selling their skills, pull Johns into prostitution parlors or wait in line far from home to wire their hard-earned money back to their families. This is the lived reality today for the vast majority of Chinese struggling to survive by selling their bodies, labor and even their souls.

In an interview in Hong Kong, Li Yang disclosed that he shot five different endings in hopes that one might be cleared by the censors. But Chinese censors will probably fear the harsh spotlight focused on rampant corruption and greed, and the implicit criticism of the authorities. That would be a pity, because the ending of China’s reform story has yet to be written. Powerful art such as *Blind Shaft* provides not only a critical social mirror, but also a glimpse of the redemptive power of simple human decency that survives against all odds, a hope flickering in the darkness.

1. Born in China in 1959, Li Yang grew up in a family of actors. After high school, he worked as an actor in the China Youth Arts Theater in Beijing from 1978 to 1985, and then studied film directing at the Beijing Broadcasting Institute from 1985 to 1987. He left China in 1988 to study German literature at the Free University of Berlin, and went on to focus on dramatic theory at Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich from 1990 to 1992. After graduating from the University of Munich, Li Yang went on to study Film Directing at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne. While at the Academy he wrote and directed several documentaries—*Women’s Kingdom* (1991), *Happy Swan* (1994) and *The Wake* (1996)—the last film completed after his graduation.
2. *Blind Shaft* received the Silver Bear for Artistic Contribution in Directing and Writing at the Berlin International Film Festival 2003, and awards at the Deauville Asian Film Festival (five out of all six awards, including Best Film, Best Director and Best Actor), Buenos Aires Film Festival, Hong Kong International Film Festival (Firebird Award), and the Tribeca International Film Festival (Best Feature Film).