

The Concrete Revolution

XIAOLU GUO, WRITER, PRODUCER, DIRECTOR

CHOICES, INC., 2004

CHINESE WITH ENGLISH SUBTITLES, 16:9 LETTERBOX, 61 MINUTES

REVIEWED BY LIANG LUO



“This is a personal film set in a political landscape. Twenty-first century China is the character, and Beijing is the battlefield of a fast changing history,” says director Xiaolu Guo of *The Concrete Revolution*, in her director’s statement that is part of the DVD’s special features. The documentary’s intimate female voice-over pays homage to the personal essay film style of Chris Marker, whom Guo also mentions in her statement. Indeed, the film promises much more than a feminine narrative about personal displacement. It attempts to tell a grand story of national and political importance—of migrant construction workers and their shadowy lives in a grand new Beijing.

The climax of this poetic anti-narrative essay-documentary is when one of the construction workers cries on camera. The story behind the emotional display in front of the “candid camera” is an old one: a poor peasant from the countryside comes to the nation’s capital to work as a manual laborer (for the 2008 Beijing Olympics) in order to support his wife and two children. He cries, not because he shares the interviewer’s deep concern for the old buildings, nor for her philosophical musings on the irony latent in any “developmental state of mind”—he cries because the construction company has not paid him for months, and he needs the money to buy seeds for the coming spring. “You are nothing without money in this society,” said the man who cries on camera.

Another male figure that dominates the screen is the young and handsome intermediary between the big construction company and the construction workers. When asked for his home province, he answers Jiangxi, while director Guo immediately associates it with the Jiangxi Soviet, the communist base active in the 1930s in the same province. Guo’s politicization of the rather apolitical worldview of her interviewees intensifies the humanistic concern of the film, and somewhat shifts its humanistic concern away from the more profane concerns of the migrant workers themselves.

Through her poetic storytelling, just as in her novel *Village of Stone* (Random House, 2004), Guo makes possible an impressively personal portrayal of a national problem. But where she succeeds, she also fails. The human touch seems so personal that it feels arbitrary, so poetic that it feels not concrete. Viewers who hunger for “a bigger picture” would wonder how much time she spent in Beijing, and how long it took to research and film this ambitious project.

How concrete is *The Concrete Revolution*? How concrete is the narrative and its representation of the construction workers? Why



U.S.-CHINA
TEACHERS
EXCHANGE PROGRAM

The National Committee on United States-China Relations seeks applications for an exchange program for teachers in American and Chinese schools. This is an unusual opportunity for schools and districts wishing to begin or to strengthen Chinese language and culture programs and for teachers wishing to live and teach in China.

Now in its twelfth year, the program has placed American teachers from across the country in “key” secondary schools throughout China—in Beijing; Dalian (Liaoning); Anqing and Hefei (Anhui); Hohhot (Inner Mongolia); Luoyang (Henan); Suzhou, Changzhou, Yangzhou, Jiangdu, and Nanjing (Jiangsu); and Chengdu (Sichuan). We anticipate that many of the same schools on the Chinese side will participate in the next year of the program.

The American teachers in China teach English as a foreign language. The Chinese teachers, all of whom teach English as a foreign language in China, will be prepared to teach Chinese history, language, and culture and/or English as a second language at participating American schools. The National Committee sponsors orientation programs for participating teachers in the U.S. and China during the summer before the exchange year.

The National Committee pays the salary of visiting Chinese teachers and the transportation of American teachers. Participating American teachers will receive partial salary replacement from the National Committee and host Chinese schools during their exchange year.

For more information and an application package, please write to tep@ncuscr.org or the Teachers Exchange Program, National Committee on United States-China Relations, 71 West 23rd Street, New York, NY 10010.

The U.S.-China Teachers Exchange Program is funded by a major grant from the Freeman Foundation.

FILM REVIEWS

the rather short-sighted constant references to Mao and the Communist Revolution? One Scandinavian restoration architect who viewed the film is puzzled by the focus on destroying the old to develop the new. Aggressive urban reconstruction is nothing new in the European and global context and is certainly not a creation of the Chinese Communist Party. A focus on the 2008 Olympics might be more effective, but that focus soon is replaced by the economic exploration of migrant workers by the big construction companies, and that again is quickly replaced by the youthful uncertainty reflected through the young and handsome intermediary with whom the director quickly identified. In the end, one wonders, who is the character in this documentary—"Twenty-first century China" as Director Guo claims, or the director herself?

That being said, Director Guo should be commended for her insightful and poetic portrayal of an important social phenomenon concerning migrant laborers and their fate in contemporary China. The intimate human touch of this documentary provides a moving representation of Chinese reality. It will be a welcome addition to the university classroom and to the general public to improve our understanding about contemporary China, and especially about peasant migrant laborers and urban reconstruction issues. A guidebook is available on the Choices, Inc. Web site at <https://www.choicesvideo.net/guidebooks/Concreteguidebook.pdf>. ■

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India of the Gandhis

DIRECTED BY FABRICE HOSS

PRINCETON, NJ: FILMS FOR THE HUMANITIES AND SCIENCES

DVD, 52 MINUTES, COLOR, 2004

REVIEWED BY SUMIT GUHA

This documentary seems to have originally been made for French television and shot in 2004, shortly after the victory of the Congress-led coalition in India's general elections of that year.

Its central theme is not easy to extract, but appears to be that India is a Hindu land immersed in deep spiritual values such as renunciation. Its great twentieth century leaders all achieved distinction by acts of renunciation. Mahatma Gandhi renounced a career as a barrister and lived an austere life; Jawaharlal Nehru renounced a comfortable upper-middle class life to lead the independence movement. What his daughter Indira Gandhi renounced is unclear. Her son, Rajiv Gandhi gave up a luxurious private life to become Prime Minister. His widow Sonia Gandhi followed him on the national stage—her renunciation of the post of Prime Minister in favor of Manmohan Singh in 2004 shows her capacity for renunciation. Thus, these characters are knitted together by the theme of renunciation and by association with the sacred site at Prayag near Allahabad where "his majesty the Ganges" (sic!!) meets the Yamuna. They have therefore been "inheritors of a dynasty."

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