



The AFI FEST Interview: Director Qiu Yang on Cannes-Bound A GENTLE NIGHT

Description

Posted by Larry Gleeson

Qiu Yang is an alumnus of AFI FEST with his short film [UNDER THE SUN \(AFI FEST 2015\)](#). We caught up with Yang to talk about his latest short, A GENTLE NIGHT. The film will have its world premiere at the 2017 Cannes Film Festival, where it will compete for the Short Film Palme d'Or.

AFI: As a filmmaker, you have a knack for telling stories that are anchored in the real world and oftentimes feel as though they could be pulled from newspaper headlines. How do you find your stories?

Qiu Yang: I always take inspiration from real life. Everything in my films either happened to me, or are real stories I heard. I don't really imagine stories or drama. Newspapers are actually one of my inspiration sources for my projects. I'm always more interested in the story behind the headline, the history that leads up to the "headline moment," or the aftermath. I believe those are where you could really see the clash of humanity. I always believe that reality is more magical than anything imagined, especially in such an impossibly complex country like China.

Every day, if you look carefully enough, drama and conflict happen everywhere around you, with real people and real character depth. No simple plot or truth, no linear character arc, no good or bad guys, no cheap sentimentality. That complexity is where the greatest drama lies, and to explore that complexity is, for me, a way to explore the complexity of humanity, as well as to understand the world we live in.

Qiu Yang
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AFI: In both A GENTLE NIGHT and UNDER THE SUN, the performances from your lead actors add so much emotional depth to the material. What is your process working with your actors?

QY: I think it depends on the projects and the film languages I want to explore.

I work a lot with nonprofessional actors, often because of the project, as well as the practical limitations. For example, all the actors in both shorts are nonprofessional, real people I found in my hometown. When I need to cast nonprofessionals, I usually handle all the auditions myself, and I don't look for someone who can act, but for someone who is able to be themselves naturally in front of the camera. Depending on their personality and physicality, I will decide which characters are the most suitable for them. So, in a way, they don't become the characters as much as the characters become them.

I don't really do rehearsals, maybe just a bit of staging in pre-production, just to save on set time. Although I do have the tendency to do a lot of takes on set. On the set, I always try to create the most realistic environment. I always try to shoot on locations, and only use small crew, with very limited equipment, especially lights. So, the nonprofessional won't feel like they are on a film set — they are really reacting to things and people in ways they would in real life.

Of course, sometimes I need to work with professional actors. If the casting is right, then I don't really need to do much. I usually let the actors perform, and most of time, I just tell them to bring down their performance.

AFI: You have a background in photography. How does that inform the visual style of your shorts, and the collaboration process with your cinematographers?

QY: I actually had more background in painting when I was younger, before I went into photography. When I prepare a film, I don't usually look for visual inspiration from films, but from paintings and photography. They often give me more interesting perspectives when looking at the world visually.

Because of the type of films I do and the way I work, I always want something that looks as naturalistic as possible. Normally I have an extended pre-production with my cinematographer, and we do all the location scouting together. We always look for places not only with great lighting already available, but places that also could satisfy what I want from a director's point of view. When we are shooting, we normally do only a little enhancement on lighting, and it already looks beautiful, but still naturalistic.

AFI: This is your second short to screen at Cannes. Do you have any advice for other filmmakers who are having their first festival experiences?

QY: My advice would be to enjoy the festival, as a celebration of the art, and be honest with yourself and other people. Don't pretend to be someone you are not.



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