



QUEER EAST

East Palace, West Palace

+ intro by Chris Berry, Professor of Film Studies, King's College London

Zhang Yuan on 'East Palace, West Palace'

Zhang Yuan isn't gay, but he's been planning to make a 'gay film' for some time. He first mentioned the idea to me as he was finishing his second feature *Beijing Bastards* (1993); one of the kids who acted in that film was bisexual, and during the filming he had opened Zhang's eyes to the existence of the city's burgeoning gay subculture. Zhang found this deeply exciting, and immediately wanted to somehow deal with it in a film. It seemed to me that what he was responding to most strongly was the realisation that so many residents of Beijing were actively pursuing their most secret desires, in tacit defiance of the authorities.

Zhang's own legal position is as nebulous as any gay man's. China has no law against either homosexuality or independent filmmaking, but anyone practising either vice is highly vulnerable to censure from the neighbourhood police, the Public Security Bureau or any of the country's many other agents of control. Zhang's 'illegal' filmmaking was targeted in December 1993, when the authorities brought pressure on the producer of his third feature *Chicken Feathers on the Ground* to fire him from the television-financed project; Zhang's wife Ning Dai documented both the few days of filming and the anguished decision to abandon the film in her tape *A Film Is Stopped* (1994).

Soon after, the Film Bureau issued its notorious blacklist, naming six film and video directors and one video collective who were not to be financed, supplied with equipment or services or in any other way supported by companies or individuals. Zhang Yuan and Ning Dai were both on the list.

Zhang's immediate response was overtly defiant. He spent the months of May and June 1994 making *The Square*, a documentary on the political and social economy of Tiananmen Square, not only the most public space in the whole of China but also the symbolic heart of the People's Republic. Last year he made another feature, *Sons*, a docu-drama about a 'typical' dysfunctional family which was both a prize-winner and a huge popular success at the Rotterdam Film Festival in January. But throughout these last two years he has also been working on the script for his 'gay film', under the title *East Palace, West Palace*.

Whenever I ran into him, in Beijing or at some festival abroad, I'd hear about the latest evolution of the project. He started out writing it himself, and initially gave it a clear sociological thrust: it was going to offer a panorama of gay lives in contemporary Beijing. Then, when he realised that he wanted to go beyond social observation, he brought in Wang Xiaobo to co-write the script; the dramatic structure became more unconventional and the focus became more psychological. Speaking at the Rotterdam festival this year, Zhang said that it would be his 'first fiction film'. By then, he was already beginning to have second thoughts about the title: 'East Palace' and 'West Palace' are the gay slang names for the public toilets on either side of Tiananmen. But many people around the world are now waiting for a film called *East Palace, West Palace*, so he may well bow to their expectations and leave the title unchanged.

Why does a straight man make a film about gays?

There are several reasons why I was interested, but one incident in particular prompted me to do this. There's an institute here doing research into AIDS, and it wanted to conduct interviews with gay men about their sexual habits. Most gay people in Beijing are very closeted, and so hardly any came forward. And then the researchers did something incredibly stupid: they asked the police for help. The police hauled in some known gay people and the researchers used the authority of the police to interrogate them. There are many ridiculous things in Chinese society, but this struck me as being one of the most absurd things I'd ever heard of. It made me want to meet gay people myself, to talk to them and find out what (if anything) is different about them.

So you interviewed gay people yourself?

I did what I usually do when I prepare a new film. I talked to many mothers of handicapped children before I made *Mama*, to many young people in the music business before I made *Beijing Bastards*, and to all four members of the Li family who were going to appear in *Sons*. In this case, I tried to learn as much as I could about the lives of gay people, in China and abroad. The more I understood about their lives, the more excited I felt by their stories, their feelings and their relationships. The conclusion I came to is that the lives of so-called 'controversial' minorities can reveal the dynamics of a society very clearly.

Is this film going to be like your other films in other ways too? Or is it very different?

The research process was very similar, but the actual making of the film is quite different. This film is completely fictional. I'm working from a detailed script, and I'm using real actors who are not playing themselves. I've found myself wanting to make a more dramatic film; I think *Sons* was a step in that direction, but this goes further.

One more similarity with the earlier films is that this is being shot entirely on location, but the result will be very different visually. We have thought a lot about the composition of the images, structure, colour, contrast and pace. I like using real locations because they provoke your imagination. Shooting in the cruising park, for example, helps you to find the right image, the real meaning. Being there, I can vividly imagine what passes between one man and another, what they talk about, what they do.

Because it's the first 'gay film' from China, it will be met with a great weight of expectation, especially from gay audiences. Does that worry you?

I've thought a lot about that. To me, the best thing is to make the film as honestly as I can, to be true to what I've seen and what I've felt most deeply myself. If I'm genuinely honest in the film, audiences should be able to understand whether they're gay or not.

Zhang Yuan talking to Tony Rayns, *Sight & Sound*, July 1996

EAST PALACE, WEST PALACE (DONG GONG XI GONG)

Director: Zhang Yuan

Production Companies:

Quelqu'un Autre Productions,

Amazon Entertainment Ltd

Executive Producer: Willy Tsao

Producers: Zhang Yuan, Christophe Jung, Christophe Menager

Associate Producer: Zhang Yukang

Screenplay: Wang Xiaobo, Zhang Yuan

Director of Photography: Zhang Jian

Editor: Vincent Levy

Art Director: An Bing

Music: Xiang Min

Sound: Wu Gang, Shen Jian Qin, Bruno Lecoeur

Cast

Si Han (*A-Lan*)

Hu Jun (*Shi Xiaohua*)

Liu Yuxiao (*female thief*)

Ma Wen (*yamen runner*)

Wang Quan (*A-Lan as a boy*)

Ye Jing (*A-Lan as a youth*)

Lu Rong (*A-Lan's mother*)

China 1996

93 mins

QUEER EAST

East Palace, West Palace Dong gong xi gong + intro by Chris Berry, Professor of Film Studies, King's College London

Fri 27 May 20:30

Malila: The Farewell Flower + Q&A with director Anucha

Boonyawatana

Sat 28 May 15:00

Queer East Closing Night: Metamorphosis + Q&A with director JE

Tiglao

Sun 29 May 18:00

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