

MONEYBOYS

A film by C. B. Yi



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2021 OFFICIAL SELECTION



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INFO

Austrian-Chinese director, screen writer and producer C.B. Yi immigrated to Austria as a teenager. He studied at the Vienna Film Academy under the guidance of Michael Haneke and Christian Berger.

LOG LINE

The clash between big cities and rural villages in modern-day China, seen through the eyes of Fei, a hustler.

2021 | DRAMA | AUSTRIA, FRANCE, TAIWAN, BELGIUM | COLOR | 120 MIN | MANDARIN



“

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SYNOPSIS



Fei makes a living in the big city working as a hustler. His world collapses when he realizes that his family accepts his money but not his homosexuality. Broken-hearted, Fei struggles to create a new beginning in his life.

DIRECTOR & WRITER

C.B. YI

Like the heroes of *Moneyboys*, you come from a small Chinese village, and had to deal with traditions, social pressures, family expectations. What gave you the strength to break away from those?

I spent my childhood in a village by the sea, my teenage years in a small Austrian town, and as a student I got to live in Vienna and Beijing before I finally enrolled at the Vienna Film Academy.

I had the most carefree childhood one could wish for, and I like looking back on it with nostalgia. In the early films of the Taiwanese director HOU Hsiao Hsien, I can still find places and traces of that time.



Even in some works of the Japanese old master, Yasujirô OZU, do I find the warm, hearty moments and kindness of the people I experienced in my childhood.

Back then, there was hardly any criminality in my fishing village. The neighbors' doors were open to everyone during the day and we, the kids, could run to the sea right after school to play, tease crabs or collect shells.

My attractive mother, who was well known in the village, had already taken over the artistic leadership of the village Red Guards by the age of thirteen. She did not shy away from making big speeches on stage defending her beliefs. My mother was an extreme character and enthusiastic about the humanistic ideals of socialism: at only seventeen, she secretly enlisted to help rehabilitate wasteland in a land reclamation project located in the northernmost part of China, on the border of what was then the Soviet Union.

With her inspiring selflessness and sociability, my mother continued to gather artists and musicians in the 1980s, who often sang, danced and feasted at our home. Those lavish celebrations naturally gave rise to rumors in the village: people suspected unkosher things to happen when so many artists came together.

Just as yin and yang attract, my father was my mother's opposite, an introvert. The reform policy of the party leader DENG Xiaoping allowed him to open a private dental practice on the first floor of our little house. There he treated people who could not afford to go to the state hospital where my father worked full-time. They were mostly poor fishing families or peasants from remote areas, which we called "people from the mountains". My parents were united by a willingness of self-sacrifice. But while my father was always concerned about the individuals and their concrete suffering, my mother was moved by the urge to sacrifice herself for the greater good.

Many farmers and fishermen paid with vegetables from their fields, fresh fish and delicious seafood. One of my fondest childhood memories is in spring, when the fishing season had just begun. At four o'clock in the morning, the fishermen from the village would knock on our door and bring the finest sea specialties for my family and me to eat. Amazing animals that I had never seen before, and that you can no longer even find today. Later, when my father was the first to emigrate from the village to the West, our family was automatically ranked among the wealthy and envied.

There is actually only one negative memory from my childhood. That was when I spotted my babysitter at the black market of our village, secretly trying to get rice and oil. I found out that she was not getting enough food stamps to feed her five sisters. I was outraged and stole food stamps from a box in our kitchen to offer to her. Other than that, I can hardly remember any social constraints that I would have had to fight against.

It was not until I was 13 years old that I came to Austria. In the very first week, my father, who had become a stranger to me, called me into the kitchen and inculcated me a tradition-conscious, reverent behavior so that I would not become “westernized”. He explained to me with a serious face that we have to adapt quickly in a foreign country in order not to attract negative attention. And then I had to learn with him German words by heart. His insistence intimidated and upset me at the time. I also felt that my mother and father were lonely in this foreign environment and lost their verve due to the effort of always putting on a cheerful mask to the outside world. They were unhappy in the West, but were ashamed to return home without good money. Moreover, did they want the best possible life for me. So, we stayed reluctantly - and each of us lived

in his own bubble. I was a rather solitary teenager. I went to school only sporadically, I felt disoriented and rootless, I rebelled against everything inside. To break out of it, I did what many do who can no longer meet the social expectations of their family background. I moved away - to Vienna.

Luckily, I met a few people who opened my eyes to a different life whilst studying in Vienna and showed me the language of film, with which I have less difficulty than with the languages of words. I surprisingly made it into Professor Haneke’s directing class. In the first years I had to catch up a lot and

finally learned to appreciate Masters like: Robert Bresson, Andrei Tarkovsky, Stanley Kubrick, Ingmar Bergman, Shōhei Imamura, Ozu and Hou I mentioned and some more current directors like the two Andersons. I had no knowledge of film theory and was amazed by Haneke’s constant attention



to detail, whose eagle eyes immediately unmasked all cinematic laziness. It was only a couple of years later that I realized that, among many other skills, Haneke's strict school had trained me one quality: to be consistent in any and every situation.

What did it mean for you to shoot a film in China?/ What significance did it have for you to shoot a film in China?

Moneyboys may deal with a very specific situation, the migration of a young man from rural China, but for me it is a universal story about interpersonal relationships that could happen in many places around the world.

Some people sacrifice themselves for an idea, for their fatherland, family or friends, to enable them to have a better life. They are worshipped - perhaps too often - as heroes. Fei is someone who sacrifices himself for his family and friends, but he is despised by the law and family morals for prostituting himself. His self-sacrifice is not acknowledged because he falls out of the order of society and his family. He seeks recognition and love from those who exclude him. This is not a problem of Chinese society in particular. These conflicts unfold in all societies, including Europe.

The fact that I located the story in China is due above all to personal reasons.

Having grown up in the Chinese countryside is linked to so many experiences that are not visible through living in Europe, but which I carry within me like a mother tongue that hasn't been spoken for a long time. Dealing with the world of my homeland gave me confidence and security in my work, because I feel a special connection to the people, their peculiarities and conflicts. I presume, it is also important to deal at least once with one's origins in one's artistic career.

As a film director, however, I don't want to be reduced to my Chinese origins or to cultural issues. I principally work in different genres, and with different settings. Recently, I started a science fiction called *Zero*. I'm also writing in parallel a screenplay based on a historical theme about France in the seventies, a man lacking of characteristic and losing morality. My next project, *Pureland*, further develops the theme of *Moneyboys*, but in a very different context and social circumstances - the migrant milieu in Paris. It is about a young man from the Parisian middle class who is ashamed of his homeless alcoholic father. Eventually, he manages to break away from his family roots and joins a militant group of female sex workers. These last two Films will be more hopeful and less melancholic and will make up with *Moneyboys* a trilogy.

How did you choose your actors? Was it hard for them to agree? Were they not afraid of social and political repercussions?

During pre-production, which took several years, China changed rapidly. Overnight, the then relatively large freedoms with regard to subject choices and filming regulations for domestic and foreign teams, were restricted. The actors we had casted turned us down with regret. Almost half a year before we started shooting, I flew to Taipei for the first time, and stayed there until after the shoot. We received friendly support from the *Taipei Film Commission*, which also contributed financially to our project.

The Taiwanese acting star Kai Ko, who was known to me from before, was one of my favorites. After he read the script, we got luckily his commitment. Kai Ko is an actor with great talent. After we discussed his role together, he hardly needed any more guidance from me during the shoot. He is the kind of actor who can joke with the other team members half a minute before shooting, and then dive into his role immediately as soon as "action" is called. His first takes were always good. And even if we needed ten more takes for the other actors, he always remained patient and performed flawlessly.

JC LIN and Chloe Maayan are equally talented and were able to work independently without much intervention from my side. Chloe, who had previously won several awards for her lead role in *Three Husbands*, actually plays three different roles in *Moneyboys* - I'm already curious how the audience will react to that. Yufan BAI was, in contrast to the three, a bit less experienced, and accordingly insecure in the beginning. Thanks to the autonomous work of Kai, Chloe and JC, I was able to give Yufan more time and attention on the set. And I am proud of his performance.

For my teacher Michael Haneke, it was always important to protect his actors. Sometimes I compare their needs as children's who need to feel safe and respected. It's a lot about creating a trustworthy environment and spaces of freedom, so that they can flourish in their roles. The various characters of the actors also require that you handle each one differently as a director: some actors want sugar, others want the whip, still others prefer to be ignored for a while so that they can develop their role without irritation.

Due to the lack of money and time we mostly choose supporting actors via videos while watching the castings of other projects. For all the difficult group scene



as a single long shoot I could not meet the actors personally before the shooting days. Thanks to the professionalism and talent of the actors we could manage to create a realistic atmosphere within one shooting day that was provided for each scene. I felt fortunate to work with these actors and my artistic team to make all this happen.

It's important to me to have a team with which I am familiar. To work regularly with the same people who know, understand and

trust each other. As a director, it's not so much about being capable of everything, about being the smartest, but about having the right people around you for each task. When you work with kindred spirits, finding the right images on set is more efficient and fruitful: a suggestion here, a hint there, and you quickly find settings that you then don't have to change much during the course of the shoot. This is why I recently founded my own production company with my French partner Antoine Sorange under

the name *Chengefilm*, to produce qualitative and efficient films together with like-minded people and let the collective intelligence of the group emerge.

The formal visual beauty of your shots are how you convey emotions and feelings. You rely on the visuals, much more than on dialogues. Could you talk about that? Also, how do you prepare and compose your shots?

Since I realized my ability for the visual creation I wanted to know everything about handling with a film camera and lighting to create atmospheres less depending and relying on others. One year after studying with Haneke I was accepted to the master class of the DOP Christian Berger who is the long working partner of Haneke.

Camera movements and Frequent cuts in one scene often create an artificial, superficial dynamic that distracts from the actual captivating moments. I find it more exciting to arrange the characters within a plan sequence. To move them in relation to each other in a way that different views and framing sizes come into being within the course of a scene. This creates visual dynamics and image variation without interrupting the emotional continuity of the scene.

Silence plays a huge role in my films. Real bonding between people rarely happens when you talk all the time. It only happens when you suddenly stop jabbering, remain silent with sparse eye contact, and feel your counterpart. Quiet. And then you suddenly know: *that's it. This is the last time we'll see each other. Or: This is the beginning of a great love.* Such intense moments only exist through shared silence.

Talking is often a tool to distract us from the world and from ourselves. To me, when there is silence in films, it generates a mood in which we perceive people in their connectedness with the things and beings of their environment. In my films I'm not so concerned with depicting characters in their individuality, but with showing people as part of the world in which they live. Most of us can probably recognize our parents' or grandparents' house by its smell alone. I want to render such an immediate interweaving of people and places tangible.

Many viewers have forgotten that patience gives one back inner peace. But I also want to reach viewers who are perhaps no longer accustomed to pause for a longer time over an event, through a captivating story. I simultaneously set single surprising scene changes that shift us into a completely different atmosphere, which the viewers would not expect.

To me, the real subject of the film is: What does it take to let go of the past. Would you agree? And could you speak about that?

Letting go of the past or live with it is one of the main subjects in *Moneyboys*. But I always crafted the story with several subjects in mind. It is for example, also about finding the courage to be happy. Or you don't always do your fellow human beings and yourself a favor when you sacrifice yourself for them. These are topics I want to deal with in my films and screenplays: To what extent can I be there for others without hurting myself? To what extent do I need to care about myself first in order to be able to do good for others?

Depending on which mood I'm in, another subject pushes its way to the surface. And the viewers, who approach the film with their own diverse life stories, may be drawn to a subject that I hadn't even thought of myself. I don't want to dictate to anyone what she or he should think or how they should feel. It's more about stimulating thought and dialogue, without pre-determining the direction.

For me personally, the message of the film - if one wants to talk about something like that - resides in the last scene of the film. I chose a rigorous chronological

narrative structure for *Moneyboys*. The last scene alone is a flashback that pursues a scene from the middle of the film. Hidden in this scene is my appeal to all the Feis in our world. Unfortunately for my mother, this appeal comes too late.



CAST

KAI KO as Liang Fei

CHLOE MAAYAN as Lu Lu, Liang Hong, Li Yu

YUFAN BAI as Liang Long

JC LIN as Han Xiaolai



CREW

DIRECTOR & SCREENWRITER **C.B. Yi** DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY **Jean-Louis Vialard (A.F.C.)**
COSTUME DESIGNER **Zoe Wang** PRODUCTION DESIGNER **Huei-Li Liao** EDITOR **Dieter Pichler**
PRODUCTION SOUND MIXER **Yun Xie-Loussignian** SUPERVISING SOUND EDITORS **Hjalti Bager-Jonathansson,**
Karim Weth RE-RECORDING MIXER **Thomas Gauder** COMPOSER **Yun Xie-Loussignian**
PRODUCTION **KGP Filmproduktion, Zorba, Flash Forward Entertainment, Panache**
Productions IN COPRODUCTION WITH **ARTE France Cinéma, Taipei Film Commission,**
La Cie Cinématographique INTERNATIONAL SALES **Totem Films** DISTRIBUTION **ARP Sélection**



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