



MULTIMEDIA REVIEW COLUMN

A Long Way Home

What's hot in anthropological multimedia spaces right now? In this issue, we take a look at Luc Schaedler's 2018 documentary film *A Long Way Home* (<https://store.der.org/a-long-way-home-p1031.aspx>).

To say this film is (still) hot would be somewhat of an understatement. It has been seen in all the right spaces and the critics are impressed:

EPOS Intl. Art Filmfestival, Israel, 2020

Festival International de Programmes Audiovisuels, France, 2019

Innsbruck International Film Festival, Austria, 2019

Nomination Prix de Soleure, Nomination für Swiss Film Award, Solothurner Filmtage, Switzerland, 2018

42e Festival des films du monde Montréal, Canada, 2018

Dharamshala International Film Festival, India, 2018

A Long Way Home concerns itself with the arts and political counterculture in China. We, the audience, trace recent Chinese history through the lives of five significant counterculture artists in China: the visual artists the Gao Brothers (Zhen and Qiang), the choreographer and dancer Wen Hui, the animation artist Pi San and the poet Ye Fu. The film offers teachers of anthropology rich fodder for grappling with the complexities of Chinese culture.

A Long Way Home opens with the Gao Brothers preparing photographs for a private gallery. These two men are photographers, artists, poets, and brave political commentators; their work has secured their names on the infamous Chinese 'Black List'. They speak poetically with calm observations of lived sorrows and tensions throughout the film. Towards the end of the film [1:11mins] one of the two brothers reminisces over his grandmother teaching him poetry. Without this valued education, he remarks, he may have grown up to become 'a violent policeman'. This statement is coupled—or perhaps juxtaposed—with an image of a seemingly kind policeman sitting on stones with a toddler.

Pi San's animations remind me stylistically of *The Ren & Stimpy Show* (1991) while the subjects covered offer simple yet challenging truths about society in a similar vein to *Charlie Brown* (1961). The protagonist of an animation Pi San

shows us is an innocent young boy at school. The boy uses words to make sense of the world that his teacher deems 'dirty'. So he is thrown out of the building, landing in the school yard. In the yard all the children are lining up to go through a large crushing machine that reshapes them into ideal citizens, seemingly with no voice or individuality. Pi San remarks that this is a metaphor for the Chinese government's interpretation and treatment of its citizens.

I live a long way from China in New Zealand. Here, as an artist and anthropologist I enjoy a great many freedoms. I write a poem and publish it, wondering how many 'likes' or book sales I will secure. I do not specialise in Chinese history or culture (although before our current pandemic I did travel upon invitation to teach medical humanities in China). Many of TAPJA's readers will have far greater knowledge of China than I. I'm mentioning my positionality because one of the incredible strengths of the film is the way in which it raises awareness for those of us with little general knowledge and understanding of Chinese culture and politics. Topics traversed through the artists' lived experiences range from social catastrophes, torture and murder to bravery, education, luck and visions of a democratic humane society. This is not an easy watch. It is hard hitting and provocative. While watching this 73-minute film I oscillated between engrossed curiosity and concern for the five artists and reflection on my own experienced cultural freedoms and restraints. I suspect other viewers will likely experience similar reflective journeys; journeys well worth taking.

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