

San Francisco International Film Festival 2014—Part two

***Tamako in Moratorium, Standing Aside, Watching, Three Letters from China*: Greater urgency from Japan, Greece and China**

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This is the second of several articles on the recent San Francisco International Film Festival, April 24–May 8. The first part was posted May 12.

Three Letters From China

The turn by the Chinese Communist Party to capitalist restoration from 1978 was a desperate bid to resolve mounting economic and political crises, which had their roots in the contradictory character of the 1949 Chinese revolution. The adoption of market reforms required active state repression and violence, spawning a small, privileged layer that enjoys enormous wealth at the expense of the vast majority of the population.

Exploring three diverse locales, Luc Schaedler's *Three Letters from China* (original title—*Watermarks*) is a fascinating documentary snapshot of contemporary China and the tribulations of its people.

Schaedler states that since “the crushing of the democracy movement in 1989 [Tiananmen Square], I have followed the upheaval in China with equal parts amazement and irritation: the country looks like a huge construction site and seems to be involved in a precipitous search for itself. In this unstable present the protagonists are taking tentative but courageous steps in the future.”

In the parched, poverty-stricken north, an elderly couple, Wei Guancai and his wife, describe how water has disappeared from the area since 1986, making life nearly impossible. Six hundred kilometers away, their son Wei Jijua lives a harsh existence with his wife and son in a dust-laden industrial zone where he is employed at a coal-washing operation. “Drivers come here from all over China. They don't have farm land anymore, so they come here to work.” One of Wei's coworkers says that “our boss made tens of millions on this coal-washing business ... the work makes your face black.” Other workers complain that “we can't make money, but our boss sure can.”

With genuine sadness, Wei's wife discusses the pain it causes her husband to be separated from his aging parents. When asked about her dreams, she replies: “What kind of dreams can I have under these conditions?”

Secondly, the filmmakers present an ancient rice-growing village in the south, in verdant Guangxi Province. It is an area of immense beauty whose residents carry on an inevitably confused conversation about the Maoist Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and the 1989 events in Tiananmen Square.

The final sequence features the huge metropolis of Chongqing (six to seven million people in the city alone) on the Yangtze River in Central China. In the shadows of the city's high-rises, a fisherman's daughter, Chaomei, occasionally helps her parents on their boat. Against their insistence that she get an education, Chaomei prefers the city's night life and working as a waitress.

Her story is jarring. Born in 1994, she was found abandoned by her adoptive parents and barely survived. Later, her father and mother were penalized by the state for rescuing her. She speculates that either her real parents were too poor to keep her or wanted a boy. Without a trace of guile, Chaomei, who dresses like a boy, explains that she would have preferred to be a "Chinese man ... People ask if I'm a boy or a girl, I sometimes say both."

The movie ends with an interview with a Chongqing environmentalist: "Our country is facing an imbalance of wealth and social development. The rich are getting richer and they spend their money on luxuries. The poor are starving and struggling in poverty."

With its sympathy for China's oppressed, Schaedler's moving film points, above all, to two linked realities: that popular discontent is widespread, not only in the urban working class but in the rural areas, and that this vast country represents a social powder-keg.