



老石

Lao Shi

Old Stone

Johnny Ma

Producer Wu Xianjian, Chi-an Lin, Jing Wang, Sarah Stallard. **Production company** Maktub Films (Vancouver, Canada). **Written and directed by** Johnny Ma. **Director of photography** Leung Ming Kai. **Editor** Mike Long. **Music** Lee Sanders. **Sound design** Terressa T Tate. **Sound** Sheng Yong. **Production design** Zheng Chen, Zhang Xueqiang. **Costumes** Li Ke. **With** Chen Gang (Lao Shi), Nai An (Mao Mao), Wang Hongwei (Captain), Zhang Zebin (Li Jiang), Luo Xue'er (Xue'er).

DCP, colour. 80 min. Mandarin.

Premiere 12 February 2016, Berlinale Forum

A man falls down the stairs, but instead of helping him, the bystanders just take photos with their phones. Lao Shi is a taxi driver and he's fighting for justice in the darkest recesses of Chinese society. The man who pushed him got into his taxi drunk not so very long ago, grabbed the steering wheel and caused an accident. The victim of the crash has been in a coma ever since, and because his family is destitute, Lao Shi is paying the hospital bills. The insurance company is refusing to cover the costs because the taxi driver left the scene of the accident with the injured man because no help was in sight. Now Lao Shi needs the testimony of his passenger, who angrily refuses to cooperate. The symbolism of the protagonist's name, which means "old stone", is clear: in a society of blinkered people only concerned with their own future, the taxi driver's desire to help makes him seem as if he's from another era. On his quest to find who's responsible for his plight, the victim ends up becoming a perpetrator himself, and *Lao Shi* gradually morphs into a real horror film.

Anke Leweke

Different shades of grey

A few years ago while travelling, I overheard a story about a truck driver who hit and injured a man in the middle of the night. But instead of calling for help, when the truck driver saw that no one was around to witness the accident, he drove backwards over the injured man, killing him.

After a police investigation, the truck driver finally confessed to the murder and explained that his act was due purely to the practical reason that if the injured person had lived, he would be paying the man's hospital bill for the rest of his life. But if the injured died at the scene, the truck driver would only have to pay a one-time fee to the man's family as compensation. So after weighing his options, the truck driver decided it was more practical to kill than to save a human life.

Immediately, images started to pop into my head and I knew I had to find a way to try to express the unbelievable dilemma that drove this truck driver to commit murder. The decision the truck driver had made scared me even more because I actually understood his reasoning. In a sort of 'if I were in his shoes' situation, with the same lot in life and knowledge of the society around him, I wondered how I would've decided to act. It scared me to the core that I didn't really know the answer.

To me, the story in *Lao Shi* is my way of expressing what I had felt it for a long time: that in our society, it is harder and harder for people to do good deeds. Everyone looks after their own interests first before considering anyone else's.

It is not my goal to point fingers with this film. I only want to reflect the reality of what is happening in our society: that modern man is practical to the point of being inhumane. In this story, there should be no final judgment of good or evil; only different shades of the grey areas that each man must navigate according to himself.

Johnny Ma

"In China no communication is ever direct"

You moved to Toronto at the age of ten. To what extent are the circumstances in Lao Shi tied to Chinese society? Do you see similar circumstances in Canada?

Johnny Ma: Actually, originally I had a US location in mind, like Detroit, and Michael Shannon as the lead. Even in countries like Canada, the US, or Germany, you would deal with the rules of bureaucracy in similar fashion, maybe not as extreme as in *Lao Shi*, but just as frustrating. We just don't care about each other as much as we used to. I might be generalising, but I do feel an increased desensitisation to suffering. No one wants to get involved in anything that might get in their way. Myself included. A few months ago, for example, after a nice evening with my girlfriend, we passed a man lying on the sidewalk in pain. We switched to the other side of the street and told ourselves that there were already people there, when we actually didn't want it to ruin our evening.

Each of us is guilty of this rationalisation to different degrees. We choose to feel compassion when it is convenient for us, for example when the suffering is on the news, in a country far away. But when the inconvenient situation presents itself in front of our eyes, we make our choices with a completely different set of criteria. Take the refugee situation in Europe, for example. People are having to put their humanitarian values

to the test, now that they actually have to act and not just talk about it.

Working as a cab driver, Lao Shi is constantly on the move. How does this relate to his situation?

I like characters in constant motion, because they remind me of the neo-realist films of Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne. At first I didn't want him to be a cab driver to avoid the obvious comparison to Scorsese's *Taxi Driver*. But this profession seemed a perfect fit for a movie that presents bureaucracy as a character. It puts *Lao Shi* right between private and public responsibility.

Lao Shi has to take a journey through various institutions – the taxi and insurance companies, the hospital system, the police and the lawyers. Yet as a cab driver, he does not know how to navigate the system the modern world has set up.

Filming in China meant that we as a team had to be in constant motion as well. To get permits, we were being sent from one bureau to another, doing endless paperwork. I cannot imagine how it must be for someone in a situation like *Lao Shi*'s. To keep moving is all he can do.

Very often we see characters through windows and curtains. Sometimes smaller objects in the foreground cover parts of their faces. Could you comment on why you chose those shots?

I do not over-think my shots too much. I always trusted my own instincts and the talent of my collaborators. When we set up at a new location, I would observe the actors' movements and let the camera team give me their ideas before I run it through in my own head. I never thought consciously about hiding actors' faces and such; it was more intuitive. It's only after I finish a film that I recognise visual patterns. Ang Lee once said that in his first three films, he was looking for shots to best cover the performances. He had his breakthrough when he discovered the power of negative space. As directors, we hope to always progress and experiment. I feel like I'm still at the beginning of my process in learning the craft.

Your movie is punctuated by repeated shots of trees moving in the wind. You filmed them in a remarkable way, making them appear like seaweed moving in the current of an ocean. How did you achieve this effect?

Our cinematographer Leung Ming Kai used a lens baby concentrating on one part of the screen while keeping others unfocused. This creates a very dreamy effect where everything looks like a miniature.

The rest of the movie is set almost entirely in a grey, urban environment. Only at the end do we see a change of setting, when two characters wrestle in deep mud. What meaning does this contrast of nature and civilisation have for you?

The bamboo forest had something stunning and mystical about it. We knew we had to film it, even if we didn't yet know how it related to the film. As beautiful as it was, there was also an overwhelming darkness to it. To me it eventually started to represent the darkness that is inside *Lao Shi* and every one of us.

A fun trivia fact is that we filmed *Lao Shi* in the same area were the bamboo fight scenes in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* were shot. When writing the opening, I thought about the first shot of *Apocalypse Now*, where we see the palm tress

before they explode. That is another film about the journey into the darkness of the human heart.

The rest of *Lao Shi* was shot in a very ordinary small Chinese town on the verge of expansion. I wanted it to be nameless and to look like every other small city in China in order to emphasise that this could happen anywhere.

It seems that cigarettes and fruit are a kind of currency somewhere between corruption and courtesy. How do you see the relation between paying respect and bribery?

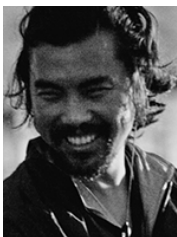
In China, cigarettes, alcohol, fruit, desserts and even petrol gift cards are all currency for paying respect and also for bribery. It's a thin line between them with a lot of grey areas. I find all of this fascinating, without wanting to judge. In China no communication is ever direct, so saving face is the most important etiquette. A million-dollar contract could be negotiated at a dinner table, while to an untrained eye it would look like one man is trying to drink another under the table while pushing a box of expensive cigarettes on him.

In what kind of a world could Lao Shi survive?

A world in which we stop thinking only about our possessions and ourselves. An empathetic world. Last year I read a story online about a man in China who stopped his car in the middle of the road to help an elderly woman who had fallen over. No one else dared to help. When someone asked him if he was at all afraid that the injury might be a trap to blackmail him, he replied that imagined his own mother in place of that woman, and how angry he would be if no one had helped her. It sounds simple and straightforward, but why didn't anyone else think like he did?

All we can hope is that if we were ever in a similar situation, we would meet a person who treats us with kindness and human decency. What happens to Lao Shi is not just a movie plot; it happens in the world we live in. But we should not become cynical, because that's the poison that takes us closer to in-human rationality.

Interview: Björn Hochschild, January 2016



Johnny Ma, aka Nan Ma, was born in Shanghai, China in 1982. He and his family immigrated to Toronto, Canada when he was ten. He made his first short films while studying Directing and Screenwriting at Columbia University in New York. *Lao Shi / Old Stone* is his first feature-length film.

Films

2011: *O Genio de Quintino* (13 min.). 2013: *A Grand Canal* (19 min.). 2016: *Lao Shi / Old Stone*.