



枝繁叶茂

## Zhi fan ye mao

Life after Life

Zhang Hanyi

**Producer** Jia Zhangke, Zhang Yong. **Production company** Xstream Pictures (Beijing, People's Republic of China). **Written and directed by** Zhang Hanyi. **Director of photography** Chang Mang. **Editor** Matthieu Laclau. **Sound design** Zhang Yang. **Sound** Wang Ti. **Production design** Yu Haoran.

**With** Zhang Li, Zhang Minjun, Wang Ji Shan, Wei Xiao Min, Wang Bing Qun, Zhang Zhi Min, Zhang Yan Xiu, Li Min Shan, Wang Jun Jun, Zhang Shu Xiang.

DCP, colour. 80 min. Mandarin.

**Premiere** 17 February 2016, Berlinale Forum

It's hard to say exactly when it happens. A hare is let loose in the forest, a dog gives chase and the boy tears after them, his father in tentative pursuit. Minutes pass, the forest falls silent, and when the boy re-enters the frame, something has changed: he now speaks with the voice of his dead mother. Mingchung shows little surprise at Xiuying's return, he even asks why she didn't come earlier. She says she'll leave again once she's completed one simple task, to replant the tree that stands before their now abandoned home. But where do you move a tree to when it feels like the whole area is taking its last breaths? Mingchung's uncle's orchard is already dust and the very landscape seems sickly, the earth scarred and yellow, the air grimy from the mine, the sky perpetually grey. Maybe that's why Xiuying's passage was so easy, this place already seems like a strange netherworld, where goats shelter in trees, mice overrun abandoned wardrobes and boulders descend the mountain apparently unaided. Zhang Hanyi's debut film is a beautifully austere ghost story, the story of a ghost returning home and finding nothing left, a story where a final glance at the camera is the only solace.

*James Lattimer*

## A wild ghost

My grandfather planted a silk tree in our family's courtyard long before I was born. He took very good care of it and the tree thrived. For as long as I can remember, the tree was quite thick and strong, sitting in the centre of the yard. It bloomed beautifully every summer. Our whole family grew used to its existence over the years. Enjoying the cool shade and fragrant flowers all became a very natural part of our lives. Later, when we moved away, the courtyard was deserted. No one visited there after my grandfather passed away. But that silk tree, though unattended, surprisingly grew even bigger, with its crown covering the whole yard. Throughout his life, until he grew ill and died, my grandfather was somewhat eccentric, as if nothing in his life ever went his way. But the rest of us in the family could still feel his presence even after his death. That kind of feeling lasted for years.

One day, I passed our old place when I went to visit my grandfather's grave. Parts of it have collapsed because of the disused coal mine underneath. When I was looking at the dilapidated yard, I started thinking that if my grandfather's spirit were to return with an unfulfilled wish, it would be to move the tree out of the gradually desolated village. This is my initial motivation for making this film. In fact, there are countless villages like this on the Loess Plateau and in the whole of China, villages that were once prosperous and flourishing. And in those villages, there is a great deal of folklore passed down orally through generations. In all of them, it seems there is the belief that the spirits of the dead will come back if they can possess a living body, and the belief in reincarnation and that animals can turn into humans at weddings and funerals – even though no ordinary people have ever seen such things with their own eyes. So I created the character of Xiuying, an ordinary rural woman who had a confused life, died in an accident at a young age and was obviously not content to be dead like that. After a decade of wandering as a wild ghost, she returns to her almost abandoned village to move the tree in her family's courtyard, as if to leave some traces of her existence.

*Zhi fan ye mao* was shot in my hometown in Bin County, Shaanxi Province. It's an aggressively terraced area where the ground is broken with vertical cleavages and terraced gulches. I tried to make full use of the landscape during the shoot, incorporating long takes to guarantee the integrity and continuity of the space. The actors and cameras had to roam through gullies and down slopes. Remnants of ancient folklore and similarly forgotten villages combined with my imagination, resulting in the images in this film.

Zhang Hanyi

### “Those who inhabit the past watch the country with a different eye”

*From one point of view, Zhi fan ye mao can be seen as a kind of documentary about the quick death of rural communities in Shaanxi Province. How did you come to the idea of centring the story on a returning ghost? And why?*

**Zhang Hanyi:** China is urbanising very rapidly, and the countryside is changing just as much as the cities are. Rural communities are dying quickly for two clear reasons: migration to the cities and industrialisation. What makes country-dwellers

flock to the cities? The reasons include house collapses due to abandoned underground mine tunnels, and the building of factories on what used to be farmland, the land from which people made their living. So more and more country-dwellers are looking for new lives and new sources of income in the cities. That's why we're seeing so many deserted villages and derelict houses, and why the cities are burgeoning while country villages are dying.

I come from Shaanxi Province, and the village I was born in is a case in point. When I think back to my childhood, I remember the liveliness of rural life back then and I particularly remember the folk tales I was told. One that struck me very deeply was the notion that a dead person might come back to inhabit the body of someone living. I never came across a case like that in real life, but this story, set in a dying village, needed what we can call 'an eye from the past'. Those who inhabit the past are the dead, so they watch what's happening to the land now with a different eye. That's why I brought my memories of local folklore and the fantasies they inspired into this story that records the decline of such villages. You can find visual traces of beliefs rooted in folklore, but folk tales have generally been passed down orally – a vital tradition which may well last longer than the village communities themselves.

*I would guess that most of your actors are non-professionals, and the cast list at the end of the film reveals that some of them kept their real names for their roles. How did you cast the film? Was it hard to get what you needed from your actors?*

Yes, most of the actors are non-professionals. They are ordinary people who happen to live where we shot the film. I had general impressions of all the characters while I was writing the screenplay, so when I finished writing I just went back to my old village and chose the people who most closely resembled the characters I'd envisaged. I didn't really ask them to 'act'; I hoped they would simply live their normal lives in front of the camera. I never planned to use much editing, and I kept the camera some distance from the actors. What I shot was mostly normal scenes of rural life. I tried to relax the actors by explaining to them what I needed them to do rather than showing them the script. Basically, they wore their normal clothes, did what they normally do and said what they normally say. They got used to it quickly enough, and just 'acted'. The exception to this was the young actor who plays Leilei, the character whose body is taken over by his late mother Xiuying. He's an ordinary boy, and obviously has no experience whatsoever of life as a village woman. So I did go through the script with him, scene by scene, explaining the situation and the problems faced by Xiuying, helping him to understand her character. He grasped it very quickly and did a great job.

*There's no overtly Buddhist element in Zhi fan ye mao, but all the characters accept reincarnation and spirit-possession as facts. Are they Buddhists? Or do their beliefs have some other root?*

None of them is Buddhist, but they do accept some Buddhist ideas. Most Chinese villagers have no defined faith or even any clear concept of religion. They certainly don't follow any one religion, and tend to pick and choose their spiritual beliefs. For example, the idea that reincarnation provides continuity from generation to generation has become a kind of consensus view, a secret agreement. It helps people to face the deaths of their relatives, and even their own eventual deaths.

*Most of your scenes are single, unedited shots, so when you do edit within a scene the effect is rather striking. What are your ideas about staging the action and pacing the film?*

I wanted to establish a steady pace for this 'ghost' story, and to maintain it from start to finish. That's why I opted for the 'one scene/one shot' approach. Even in scenes that do contain changes of shot, I tried to maintain that pace and tone. When it came to putting it all together, that was still the guiding principle. Of course I wanted smooth transitions from scene to scene, but I tried to preserve the spirit of the way we'd shot the film.

*Why did you decide not to use music in *Zhi fan ye mao*?*

As the leading characters wander through the scenes, we hear all kinds of background sound. Some are industrial noises: the constant hums that come from factories and power plants, weird mechanical sounds that come from far away. Some are natural sounds: birds twittering, dogs barking, the sound of the wind blowing through the woods. I wanted to use these sounds rather than music because they help me to tell the 'ghost' story in an honest and earthy way.

*Can we take the captions used near the beginning and at the end of the film as evidence that Leilei does successfully 'come back'?*

Yes, we can. Xiuying has been gone for some years, and she just borrows Leilei's body. The idea is that the dead person's spirit goes to some nether world but returns to this world to take care of unfinished business. A ghost can only do things by inhabiting the body of a living person, so Xiuying's spirit possesses the body of her son Leilei. That's what I meant by 'borrowing his body'. Once the 'ghost' has achieved her wish, she has to give the body back to its original owner. And Leilei, the living person, has to come back to face his own life, no matter what the future holds for him.

*Interview: Tony Rayns, January 2016*



**Zhang Hanyi** was born in Bin County, Shaanxi Province, China in 1987. He completed studies in directing and screenwriting at the Central Academy of Drama in Beijing in 2009. *Zhi fan ye mao* is his first film.