

APART TOGETHER

By Wang Quan An



« Universal resonance... Engaging. » - THE HOLLYWOOD REPORTER

« Well-played, light family drama that references major historical and political issues beneath a low-key front. » - VARIETY

« Berlin could not have got off to a better start than with this outstanding movie: a wonderfully gentle, intimate, wonderfully composed family drama that, might contribute to a new world cinema trend: neo-Ozu. »
THE GUARDIAN

the directors label



The Hollywood Reporter

Apart Together -- Film Review

By Maggie Lee, février 11, 2010

Bottom Line: Drama about a family separated by civil war has universal resonance but skims over deeper historical and psychological trauma.

BERLIN -- Wang Quan'an's fifth film "Apart Together" is another variation of his recurrent set-up of one woman flirting with two husbands (or boyfriends), torn between obligation and love (or attraction). **Small in scope but tightly structured, gracefully acted and directed, it opens up deep historical wounds and generational traumas created by China's civil war, but does not press on them, exploring instead more universal human dilemmas lightened by scrumptious culinary episodes.**

Generally engaging but moving at an even-keeled, slightly flat pace, it probably cannot repeat the international market buzz of Wang's Golden Bear winner "Tuya's Marriage," but should still get respectable fest-play and niche release.

Set in the late '80s, when Taiwan first organized tours for retired Nationalist (KMT) army soldiers to visit their families in mainland China, it follows old veteran Liu Yangsheng (Ling Feng)'s return to Shanghai to find his wife Yu-e (Lisu Lu) whom he lost at the pier during the chaotic retreat to Taiwan in 1949. The Chinese title "Tuan Yuan," which means 'happy reunion,' is meant ironically, as his visit causes discord among Yu-e's adult children and turns into an awkward threesome with her current husband Lu Shanming (Xu Caigen), also an ex-soldier, but on the Communist side.

Lu appears exceedingly courteous and accommodating, agreeing to let Yu-e follow Liu back to Taiwan, despite the children's disapproval or demand for financial compensation. However, things do not work out as planned. In a droll scene, Lu and Yu-e, who are common-law partners, have to get married and pose for their virgin wedding photo before they could get a divorce. Then, Lu has a stroke, giving Yu-e second thoughts.

Liu's story could speak for a million other Taiwan war veterans but Wang tactfully does not push his complex relationship with Lu as a political allegory of PRC-Taiwan division. If Wang had played up the two men's rivalries especially their emotional blackmail in the mirrored scenes, when Lu reveals his bitterness after getting drunk at dinner, while Lu brings up his share of lifetime miseries at another meal, the film would have more dramatic intensity and the characters more human depth.

Even though major plot developments are all timed around meals, "Apart Together" is a subversion of epicurean films celebrating food's healing power. Despite the delicious feasts on display, nobody touches the dishes. The dinner table becomes the film's most powerful

battleground and symbol for family politics.

Wang's regular D.O.P. Lutz Reitermeier captures Shanghai in a state of flux that reflects Liu's estranged status (reinforced also by his use of Mandarin while Yu-e's family natter away in Shanghainese). His somber and meticulous compositions encapsulate the three characters' shifting intimacies and distances in portrait style close-ups against crowd-scenes in more natural medium shots.

Wang eschews a music score but pregnant moments are interspersed with songs full of personal significance and political nuance. The most lyrical of which is Yu-e humming the '30s song "Night-time Shanghai" as she and Liu sit in their own home, now converted into a hotel, and the last trailing notes are heard as the camera pans across the tiled rooftops of '30s buildings, nestled within high rises. Or when Liu sings a song expressing his home-sickness in Taiwan dialect, symbolizing his cultural displacement.

It is a rare treat to see elderly and highly distinguished actors hold the fort with calibrated performances that only come with age. However, as a result, their children are pushed to the periphery of the narrative and leave little impression -- especially Liu's sullen and resentful son and Yu-e's grand-daughter Na-na, who could have enriched the film were they more fleshed-out. Instead, the script indulges in too many neat parallels, like Liu and Lu reversing roles as cooks, or the decision of Na-na's fiance to study abroad.

Apart Together (Tuan Yuan) Dir: Wang Quan'an. China. 2010. 93mins.

11 February, 2010 | By Dan Fainaru

An original choice to open Berlin on its 60th anniversary, this modest family melodrama turns out to be a thin – if kindly – bittersweet autumnal romance. Whatever political intentions may have been buried in *Apart Together's* script, which follows a Kuomintang soldier's attempted reunion with the woman he left behind in Shanghai forty years previously, there is little trace of them left onscreen.

KMT soldier Liu Yangsheng (Ling Feng), retreated with the Nationalists to Taiwan – temporarily, they thought – as the Communists marched across China, leaving his pregnant lover, Yu-e, behind in Shanghai. Now, as played by Ling Feng, comes back to his native city to find her (Lisa Lu).

It turns out that after he left, she married another man, Lu Shenmin (Xu Caigen), who willingly adopted her baby, and is now a grandmother, surrounded by an affectionate family. They all welcome the visitor, not realising that he intends to ask Yu-e to leave everything behind and join him in Taiwan. But she turns out to be willing to make the jump, saying the passion went out of her life when he left.

Lu, when told about it, agrees to let her go in an amazing act of kindness which in other films would have generated satirical hints (could he have had enough of her?) but here is taken at face value. Her children, however, are less accommodating, whether because they fear losing face or because they are dissatisfied with the financial arrangements Liu proposes in order to placate them.

But the major obstacle is Chinese bureaucracy: it seems that Lu and Yu-e never took out an official marriage licence, so how can they divorce if they have never been legally married?

The plot moves easily from one classic cliché to the next, at a leisurely pace that belies the 93-minute running time. Carefully avoiding the political arena, *Apart Together* is awash with nostalgia from both the Taiwanese and mainland perspective, coupled with a sense of loss over warm old Shanghai which has been replaced with a cold new skyline. Though the subject almost begs for it, no attempt has been made to turn *Apart Together* into a travelogue – to the point where a tourist bus trip across Shanghai is shot entirely inside the bus.

Setting the story in early spring allows DoP Lutz Reitemeier to bathe the images in an unflattering grey, murky light, as if to underline the impending gloom of old age. The entire picture consists mostly of intimate shots of the family and its guests, often sitting at a table covered with Chinese delicacies.

The principals' combined age is an impressive 230 years. Lisa Lu, 82, is a legend of the glory days of Shanghai's cinema. Here she plays a woman who expects, after a lifetime devoted to her family, to be granted the last years of her life to live as she pleases. 72-year-old Ling Feng gets a chance to display his singing gifts towards the end, but Xu Caigen, 76, turns in a boisterous performance, stealing scenes from both of them.



Apart Together

Tuanyuan (Shanghainese, Mandarin dialogue)

By DEREK ELLEY

Posted: Thurs., Feb. 11, 2010

A well-played, light family drama that references major historical and political issues beneath a low-key front, "Apart Together" continues a quality career course for mainland Chinese writer-director Wang Quanan ("Weaving Girl," Berlin Golden Bear winner "Tuya's Marriage") without significantly advancing it or springing any surprises. Certainly the most modest Berlinale opener in recent memory, Wang's fifth feature looks set for a solid fest run and some upscale niche business in Asian-friendly salles.

Referred to in the pic's English title, but not in its original Chinese one (literally, "The Delegation Member"), the underlying Big Issue here is China-Taiwan reunification, over which the two sides have been squabbling for 60 years. Though politics are never referenced even through the allegory of divided lovers trying to reunite after more than half a century, Wang and co-writer Na Jin are already walking on eggshells.

While many nuances may escape most Western viewers (but not Chinese auds), the general story is easily accessible. It's a tribute to present-day Chinese filmmaking that "Apart Together" managed to get made at all; the subject has been referenced in other productions but never as directly as it has here.

In 1987, some 20 years after the civil war won by the communists that sent the nationalists fleeing to Taiwan, an agreement was finally reached that allowed veterans to return to China once a year to visit relatives.

In the early 21st century (the exact time is never specified), Shanghaier Qiao Yu'e (Lisa Lu) receives a letter from the one-time love of her life, Liu Yansheng (Ling Feng), who half a century earlier had left her stranded when he fled as a nationalist soldier to Taiwan.

While apologizing for never contacting her in that time, Yan-sheng's letter announces that, as his wife died three years ago and he's now in the late autumn of his life, he is coming back to Shanghai as a member of a veterans delegation and hopes to see her.

The letter is read in front of the whole of Yu'e's family, including her husband, Lu Shenmin (Xu Caigen), son Jianguo (Yu Baiyang), elder daughter Aihua (Ma Xiaoqing), younger

daughter Xinhua (Jin Na) and granddaughter Nana (Monica Mok). Yansheng's existence is no secret to the family, but initial reaction to his visit is mixed. Yu'e's husband is surprisingly relaxed, whereas the children are more unsettled. "What if his wife hadn't died?" asks one daughter.

After an uneasy welcoming meal at the family's modest backstreet home, Yansheng is invited to stay at their house rather than in a hotel. He, Yu'e and Nana spend time seeing the modern sights of Shanghai, now virtually unrecognizable to Liu. He then privately reveals to Yu'e his true agenda: to take her with him back to Taiwan so they can enjoy the last years of their lives together in a house in Hualien.

To this point, there's been a barely visible strain of humor in the nervous family relations and the whole shebang of "welcoming back" to the city he once fled. His proposal is hardly even questioned by Yu'e, and some Western auds may have an initial problem accepting the very practical way in which the proposition is discussed by them -- and by the family as a whole -- and is supported by, of all people, Yu'e's husband.

The humor becomes briefly more explicit as unforeseen bureaucratic complications arise -- already treated more satirically in Huang Jianxin's 2001 "The Marriage Certificate" -- before the initial low-key atmosphere returns.

Plot resolves itself in a way that's both 100% Chinese and has resonances that could continue into the future, as young Nana (in a barely developed plot thread) also makes a major personal decision.

Though there are deep emotional currents supporting the central story, Wang adopts a typically restrained approach emphasized by regular German d.p. Lutz Reit-e-meier's cool, late-winter lensing of steely Shanghai. Formal family meetings (largely shot in group master shots) stress the communal basis on which decisions have to be reached, and also the social formalities hiding personal feelings that rarely surface.

Though the story is, on the face of it, centered on Yansheng and Yu'e, both Ling and Chinese-American actress Lu are given the most emotionally closeted roles, with Ling's Yansheng remaining pretty much an enigma until the very end. Despite its content, "Apart Together" is most definitely not a romantic/divided-country meller, offering few direct emotional hooks for viewers.

It's actually character actor Xu, as Yu'e's easygoing, practical husband, who mirrors the movie's essential soul of tolerance and practicality in a performance that turns into the pic's one likable, showpiece role. He's mirrored on a younger level, repping China's younger, free-minded generation, by Mok ("Ocean Flame"), who registers a strong physical presence.

Tech package is simple and unvarnished, with the cool lensing and bare-bones editing neither glamorizing nor exoticizing Shanghai. Majority of the dialogue is in the Shanghainese dialect, with Ling's character speaking in Mandarin.