



Tang Yun as Xiaochun: the lonely violin prodigy (above); lost in his music (top right); and happy with Lili (Chen Hong, bottom right)

Together

Director: Chen Kaige. Producers: Ton Gang, Chen Hong.
 Writers: Chen, Xue Xiaolu. Cinematographer: Kim Hyungkoo.
 Editor: Zhou Ying. United Artists.

Eighteen years have passed since Chen Kaige, director of *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), has made a film set in contemporary China. Since *The Big Parade* (1986), Chen, whose 1984 film *Yellow Earth* ushered in the movement of mainland filmmaking known as the Fifth Generation, has dabbled primarily in the kind of period pieces that characterize not only his work but also most Chinese cinema that gets released in America. Thus *Together* provides an opportunity for Chen to take a fresh turn in his filmography and join the new waves of young Chinese filmmakers seeking to rethink the history-obsessed traditions of the Fifth Generation—filmmakers like Nelson Yu (*All Tomorrow's Parties*, 2003), Jia Zhang-ke (*Platform*, 2000), and Wang Bing (*West of the Tracks*, 2003).

The film follows the adventures of a boy whose father has brought him from a small town to the city of Beijing, where the temptations of upward mobility lure

the ambitious father into pursuing violin lessons for his prodigy son. However, the 13-year-old Xiaochun discovers what he's been missing all his life—beautiful city women—and begins to wander off by himself, ultimately finding a great gig at the home of Lili, a well-intentioned prostitute who finds moral solace in the nostalgic songs played by a young village boy. Xiaochun's father finds a distinguished violin instructor for him, but neither the boy nor his teacher can concentrate on music, since both are obsessed with the women who haunt them, the former with his dead mother, the latter with a long-lost adolescent crush.

The film is certainly a crowd-pleaser. *Together* swept the audience awards at all the mid-sized international film festivals such as Florida, Tribeca, Filmfest DC, and the San Francisco International Film Festival, where it was the audience award runner-up in 2003. What this suggests is that the film is wooing a new kind





Xiaochun and his father (Liu Peiqi) move to Beijing.

of festivalgoer: casual movie buffs who like their films a little exotic, but comfortable enough not to shatter any preconceived notions. It also garnered high praise from Roger Ebert, who wrote (in the *Chicago Sun Times*, 6 June 2003), “*Together* is powerful in an old-fashioned, big-studio kind of way; Hollywood once had the knack of making audience-pleasers like this, before it got too clever for its own good”—which is completely correct, but hardly what makes a film great.

What festival audiences and critics like Ebert are reacting to are the similarities between *Together* and the popular American and European films of the 50s and 60s. Chen’s film doesn’t have the sarcasm or bitter irony that characterize current Hollywood product, and audiences seem to be ready to fall for a film that reminds them of a more innocent age of movie-going. It’s the nostalgia trap. With *Together*’s success, American critics are simply lauding filmmakers who make films like Americans used to do. The scenes of Xiaochun, the 13-year-old musician, taking violin lessons exemplify this tendency to imitate. In one shot, the audience sees the instructor in high-key chiaroscuro (most setups either feature noir-like shading or Spielbergesque backlighting) as he lists his rules for learning music, rules such as: “If you want to learn to play, you actually have to play,” and “You have to enjoy playing to play well”—old-fashioned clichés for not only the budding musician but the budding athlete and scholar as well. However, when such scenes take place

in a country stereotyped as backward, as China is, it’s easy to overlook the clichés in favor of the “cuteness” associated with seeing these formulas adopted by others. There can be a tendency among Americans to see other cultures as imperfect or inchoate versions of themselves, an imperialistic trait that has helped determine which foreign films will enter American commercial theaters.

Unfortunately, this cultural superiority can persist because foreign film distributors have traditionally been more reluctant to release films that critique or problematize this view of the Other in favor of films like *Together*, which is intent on praising the virtues of the country bumpkin instead of probing the problems specific to modern Beijing. By constantly reverting to the village—the nostalgia for the recent past, the hick-of-all-hicks father clad in a hideous flannel shirt and a “cute” baseball cap, the simplicity of a little boy and his violin—Chen allows his film to be absorbed by Western countries’ popular imaginations of China, which fits nicely into the filmmaking traditions one sees on Turner Classic Movies. In fact, the entire logic of the movie, not unlike *Meet Me in St. Louis*, is mobilized by the idea that the city is dangerous and deceitful, and we’ve got everything we need in our small town. While this conservative premise can be charming, especially given the pessimism that has troubled many contemporary foreign/indie features, it ends up saying very little about Chinese society, which was



Father and son together

the project of the Fifth Generation filmmakers until the late 90s. For example, the most significant clash between country and city cultures occurs in the beginning of the film, when Xiaochun's father asks his son which flannel shirt would be most acceptable in the city, and the son makes his choice even though we know he probably has no idea either. This is undoubtedly a touching scene, but it is condescending to the characters and worse yet, it is typical of the kind of cultural conflict that has nothing at stake: the consequences of choosing the "wrong" shirt are so insignificant that it might make the audience wonder whether there is in fact any real cultural difference between the rural Chinese and the citizens of Beijing.

Throughout the film, this superficial division between the country and the city is executed with similar simplicity. After explaining why the characters are lured by the big city, the film unfurls an assortment of scenes showing how ignorant but adorable both Xiaochun and his father can be. Besides falling for their terrible fashion sense, the audience is expected to love them because the boy so persistently follows his maiden around (in current American film, this would be called stalking), while the dad proves to be a handy cook (in current American film, this would be called racial stereotyping). Thus the two characters, because of their third-world charm, can satisfy desires in the American audience that are typically only tolerated in old movies and foreign films (the desire, for example,

to see women as turning points in a boy's coming of age and Asians as providers of exotic cuisines). *Together's* characters embody these repressed desires, and the film exploits this to win the audience's undivided sympathy. This recruiting of foreign films to satisfy otherwise unacceptable desires can be seen throughout the film, simultaneously reinforcing the idea that China is an underdeveloped America and justifying the conservative ideals of the past.

Chen often includes music as a central element of his work (*Yellow Earth*, *Life on a String*, *Farewell My Concubine*), and although *Together* is the first of his films to use Western music, its values come forth most brightly in its use of music that isn't Western classical. The pivotal and most genuinely moving moments of the film all employ traditional Chinese songs. When Xiaochun first performs for Lili, he plays "Dai Biao Wo De Xin," a beloved Chinese oldie. In one of the film's most emotional scenes, Xiaochun's father understands that if his dreams of financial success are to come true, he'll have to switch teachers for his son. The background music shifts from Debussy to a Chinese folk song when the father confronts and fires the violin instructor. Finally, at the end of the film, as the father learns to let go of his son (who is now sporting an urban haircut and faux-Burberry outerwear), the music played is another old Chinese melody. Thus Chen's attitudes on traditional values are visible even through the choice of music: Western classical music



The violin instructor, Professor Yu (Chen Kaige himself), with his star pupil

(especially when played by Xiaochun and another pre-teen violin student) is associated with labored beauty and professional struggle; Western pop music (the Celine Dion played at a department store) is associated with commerce and the unhealthy desire for expensive goods; and Chinese music is associated with sacrifice for the family, perhaps the most important element in Confucian culture.

Chen's inability to concoct new thrills and convincingly portray societal changes is in direct contrast with the work of Jia Zhang-ke, commonly considered the trailblazer of contemporary Chinese cinema. Jia's recent *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), another film about young people and music, resists any comparison to stock Hollywood characters, narratives, and ideologies. His characters wander seemingly aimlessly through their small-town environment, yet each choice about and clash with their expectations of how they "should" act in a near-capitalist society has much invested in it—certainly more is at stake here than what shirt one should wear. *Unknown Pleasures*, and even less provocatively experimental films like Zhang Yang's *Quitting* (2001) and Zhang Yibai's *Spring Subway* (2002), are interested in understanding the myths of contemporary society for young people disillusioned by ever-changing economic, political, and cultural policies. In their representation of local issues, these films remain obstinately inaccessible to Americans. *Together* can never really be about China because it can only

appeal to Westerners as almost-Western. It exemplifies the distinctly American idea that the world is only in equilibrium when everyone else is trying to be American. *Together*, with its soap-opera-like love tangles and use of high-fives and the word "cool," delights the cultural imperialist; *Unknown Pleasure*, with its long takes, foreign attitudes toward performed music, and unfamiliar social and economic conditions, initially alienates casual viewers, but it also provides them with the opportunity to rethink their methods of analysis, and in doing so, it is able to reveal how people around the world are coping with their specific problems.

It seems that the people who are most uneasy with Chen's film are the ones uncomfortable with the rampant father/son, son/teacher, son/hooker-with-a-heart-of-gold melodrama, especially when they compare the film to the director's renowned *Farewell My Concubine*. These critics, such as Kevin Thomas of the *L.A. Times*, denigrate *Together* for underachieving and for wasting the potential of a world-class filmmaker like Chen. What they don't realize is that the melodrama is the *best* aspect of Chen's films; it is what provides the splendor and passion they had actually been responding to the whole time. The most unforgettable moments of *Farewell My Concubine* are the most overtly emotional ones: the mutilation of the boy's fingers so he can get into opera school, the ubiquitous Gong Li creating the ultimate love triangle, the culminating suicide/stage-acting/profession of love on a de-

serted basketball court. Though *Together* is smaller in scope than *Farewell*, there are probably as many bursts of melodramatic emotion per minute in Chen's new film as in his 1993 epic because less time is spent on exposition and history telling. For example, the most exhilarating moment in *Together*, when the camera cuts to a sensational shot of the father on a hanging construction lift shooting up beside a skyscraper (possibly an homage to the 1937 Shanghai classic *Street Angel*), is reminiscent of Chen's ability to master the panoramic scope of historical epics like *Emperor and the Assassin*, while the Spielbergesque backlighting seems a natural, PG-rated extension of the opium-dazed blur of *Farewell My Concubine* and *Temptress Moon*.

Critical hostility to the small scope and undeserved melodrama tells us two things. First, it's clear that what critics reacted to as so lavish, unforgettable, and shocking about *Farewell My Concubine* was the "Banned in China" label put out by the press and the publicity, which enabled them to safely ignore the theatrical qualities and embrace the hip and digestible political undercurrents. But the label disappears in *Together*, and the result is a film that feels slight, although it says about as much about Chinese society as *Farewell* did. With the transnationalization of Chinese cinema and the globalization of the Hollywood product, Chen's new film appears more familiar and local, thus it doesn't have that edge, that political spear that tickled the fancy of Western critics while piercing the heart of a country they love to distrust.

Second, it's clear that the mediocrity of *Together* reveals the unsophisticated directorial sense that has been so evident in Chen's films since his 1993 Cannes winner. His post-1993 work simply isn't as good as he's given credit for—praise that was garnered because of his political courage, not his directorial flair. To be fair, his works are satisfyingly old-fashioned. In fact, looking at his 1990s output, we see this quality in all its rampant excess, from the lavish costumes, sets, and history-telling of *Farewell My Concubine* to the exotic smoky corridors of the Christopher Doyle-shot *Temptress Moon*, to the wide-angle battle scenes, Shakespearean betrayals, and bloody revenge of *Emperor and the Assassin*. Looking at his films this way, instead of with Thomas's "Banned in China" near-sightedness, makes me far more comfortable about *Together* and certainly about Chen's universally derided, straight-to-video sexploitation clunker, *Killing Me Softly*. That doesn't make any of these films extraordinary by any means, just consistently and unimpressively Chen's. For his truly innovative work, we

must return to his mid-80s films, such as *King of the Children* and *Yellow Earth*, to which *Together* has undeservedly been compared simply because it too is about kids and music.

It's unfortunate then that in returning to films about contemporary Beijing, Chen's conservative bad habits drag the film down with clichés: the dim-witted father who proudly hides his life savings in his cap (never a good idea); the country boy who comes of age in the cruel big city (symbolized by his duplicitous second violin teacher, played by Chen himself); and the cheesy contrast between good teacher (shot in rustic orange) and bad teacher (shot in metallic gray). Chen's strength may be visual excess, but as the past ten years have shown, he's been uninterested in exciting us with it.

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Abstract Chen Kaige's *Together* represents the tendency of American art houses and film festivals to celebrate foreign films that cling to outdated ideals of filmmaking and global exchange instead of works that push the boundaries of art and social critique. This review examines *Together* in light of that phenomenon and then places the film in the trajectory of Chen's oeuvre.

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