

BREAKING THROUGH THE WALL:

CHINA'S 3DREAMS METRO MAGAZINE # 183



WHAT IS IDENTITY IF NOT THE SNIPPETS OF HISTORY THAT ONE

CAN WEAVE INTO A PICTURE OF ONESELF? **JASMINE CRITTENDEN** SPEAKS TO NICK TORRENS ABOUT CHINESE STORIES BOTH PERSONAL AND POLITICAL – AND THE WAYS THESE HAVE BEEN SUNDERED BY THE COUNTRY'S REPRESSIVE GOVERNMENT – AS DEPICTED IN HIS LATEST DOCUMENTARY.

History, Peter Carey writes, is 'like a bloodstain that keeps on showing on the wall, no matter how many new owners take possession, no matter how many times we paint over it'.¹ But how much depends on the persistence of the painter? Does the past's mark always, inevitably, become visible of its own accord? Or is it sometimes up to us to blast the layers of concealment away? And how do we do that when an entire generation before us swears an oath to silence?



In *China's 3Dreams* (2014), filmmaker Nick Torrens ventures deep into twenty-first century China, exploring what it means to grow up without access to one's own history. His camera follows Zhang Lei, a single mother born during the Cultural Revolution. 'When I was young my parents neglected me,' she explains. 'They were only 18. Both of them believed in Chairman Mao and they devoted themselves to the revolution with their hot blood boiling.' She might know this much, but she has been denied the details. 'This history has been buried with these people and has turned to dust like them,' her cousin Zhang Mian laments, standing at the locked gates of a Red Guard graveyard. However, the inquisitive and philosophical Zhang Lei yearns to know more. *China's 3Dreams* captures her journey to find out who her parents – and grandparents – were, and how her past influences her present.

At the same time, Torrens creates a complex portrait of a nation in flux. It is one that transcends common media impressions – those articulated by Westerners, for Westerners – instead representing the plural perspectives of individuals directly affected by the major changes that have swept through China during the past forty years. 'In the 1970s,' Zhang Lei says, 'Chinese people had three dreams: a watch, a radio and a bicycle'. By the early 1980s, however, Deng Xiaoping's widespread market reforms started to take effect.ⁱⁱ Today, more and more people are aspiring to 'a better life', represented by spacious apartments and the money to buy 'whatever (they) like'.

Moving between the neon glare of modern cities and the wooden pagodas of ancient architecture, Torrens not only delves deep with his protagonists, but also shows us glimpses of an array of individuals across four generations. He films in kitchens, lounge rooms, courtyards, streets and graveyards. His subjects discuss history, politics, values and dreams, as they go about their daily rituals – from cooking to playing table tennis –

and confront significant events, like preparing for marriage and repairing troubled familial relationships. The filmmaker is never visible, but we sense that this could only be the work of thorough immersion. Beautifully restrained, *China's 3Dreams* affects us with its deep engagement with character and its naturalism, avoiding contrived dramatic structure and sentimentalism. We can't help but feel that we're peering through a window on life as it happens.



This film is certainly not Torrens' first venture into Asia. In 1984 he filmed *Running from the Ghost* (1985), a street-level study of Hong Kong hawkers. During the decade over which he worked on *China's 3Dreams*, he also completed *To Get Rich is Glorious* (1998) and *The Men Who Would Conquer China* (2004). 'I realised that, although China was already becoming very important to Australia – and to the West – what we knew about it was very little, I felt,' he tells me.

We had ideas (..) based on very specific areas of knowledge: the economic miracle, the extraordinary way that business was developing, the way that the urban landscape was changing. The information we were getting was very much based on the specific agendas of news and current affairs, and also what was becoming the replacement for documentary: specialist factual (programming), which usually involves Western presenters, telling you all about something. The voice of China itself was missing, unless I went into specialist academic literature and so on (...) I thought it was time for a deeper, long-term, observational documentary that carried the voice of the ordinary people to the West. Otherwise, we wouldn't understand China; we'd only understand what we were being told about it.

In the municipality of Chongqing, in China's southwest, Torrens found the ideal location for both researching and shooting. With a population of over 30 million, it's a seething metropolis, where real estate is booming, shopping malls are teeming, money is becoming equated with dignity and divorce is on the rise. In the heart of Chongqing lies Ciqikou, a 1000-year-old village, where peddlers transport their wares using a milkmaid's yoke, flowers are still sold on the street and age-old social structures continue to bind the community together. It is Ciqikou that Zhang Lei calls home. From

her simple house, its walls adorned with bright Frida Kahlo imitations that she paints herself, she ekes out an exceptionally modest living running a local café, while taking care of her primary school-aged daughter. 'I loved this community,' Torrens explains.



It seemed to represent what China is losing, which is its past – in architecture, in (the) spirit of community.. You generally lose that when you go into apartments, ... [Zhang Lei] was so interesting as she was so different from people of her generation and she was quite worried about that: that she doesn't seem to want to make money or earn status and is more interested in intellectual activities. She listens to music and watches films and reads. Her aim is to have a meaningful life and she can't work out why she's so alone in that .

She also told me that her parents had virtually abandoned her and each other after the Cultural Revolution. She'd never really had much to do with them and was brought up by her grandmother (...) As she started investigating, she decided that she needed to know much more about history, because it was becoming increasingly responsible for who she thought she was.

Torrens accompanies Zhang Lei as she visits her parents, cousins, uncles, various Red Guards and her ninety-year-old grandfather, speaking to them about their experiences of the Cultural Revolution and the Anti-Rightist Movement. Face-to-face interviews are interwoven with archival footage and stills, and what emerges is a multi-faceted picture: while some toed the party line because they dared not diverge; others committed acts of brutality as impassioned supporters of Mao. A few family members are willing to talk, but others appear too traumatised or frightened or guilty. We meet one Red Guard who, even as he expresses his current loyalty to the party, breaks down in tears. 'I want absolution. Doesn't everyone?' he pleads.



For Zhang Lei, pursuing her quest – and being filmed in the process – becomes an act of catharsis, allowing her to manifest compassion and develop a stronger sense of self. ‘I’d say the lives of my father and mother were completely destroyed,’ she decides. ‘I believe it hurt everyone so deeply- first the victims and later, the murderers. They also became victims’. In this way, the camera functions as an enabler, facilitating the release of Zhang Lei’s pent-up emotions.

Torrens recalls *She told me that it was the best thing that had happened to her (...) She was so insecure about her position in society. The fact that I was interested in her was the beginning, she said, of believing ‘I probably am worthwhile in my own right’ (...) The process made her feel much better about life.*

He adds that the connection between filmmaker and subject became ‘increasingly vital’. *The most important thing in [that relationship] that a filmmaker has is a compact of agreement (...) Each of you has to know what the other wants from the project and honour it. Then you get trust and you get honesty. [The filmmaker] has to work hard to diminish his presence and to use it at the same time.*

In addition to gaining an intimate picture of Zhang Lei, we also meet a young city-dweller by the name of Beowulf who speaks openly about relationships, internet censorship and what it means to be free. Beowulf’s experiences provide a compelling contrast to those of Zhang Lei, adding further layers to Torrens’ depiction. ‘The two (stories) aim to integrate into an idea of how society is responsible for affecting individual lives and happiness,’ he says. ‘Between the stories – and what surrounds them – you, hopefully, get a really good idea of how China is today.’

Beowulf lives in the city surrounding Zhang Lei’s village. Unlike her, he knows his mother well. The camera follows him through two different romantic relationships, the challenges and ideals of which are immediately familiar to Western audiences. The first is with Angel, who hopes desperately to buy a large apartment with a kitchen where she ‘can cook’. Arguments over priorities and property prices contribute to her and

Beowulf's eventual break-up. We then meet Shuli, Beowulf's second partner, and see her anxiously awaiting Beowulf's proposal of marriage. 'She was worried she was just being used in a way, which brings up another theme in China at the moment,' Torrens explains.



There's been a change that is extraordinary in Chinese history. Love is omnipresent; relationships and sex are normal and natural pre-marriage, but love isn't always deep anymore. People get together so easily, but they discard each other so easily, too.

Unlike Zhang Lei, Beowulf does not see his self-awareness as so contingent on understanding the past, but he is nonetheless curious about the world around him. The camera observes his frustrated, fruitless internet searches for information about the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre. 'Governments, they always cover up these things,' he protests to the camera. 'They don't want to let that be played on television, otherwise it will have some terrible influence on people's minds'. However, and perhaps contradictorily, he seems less interested when discussing the past with his rather forthright mother. All she dreams of, she says, are 'freedom and quality'. 'You know my father is an anti-Japanese hero,' she tells her son. *He died thanks to the Cultural Revolution. Mao, that son of a bitch. My father was in the communist-Kuomintang cooperation to fight together against Japan, so the party shouldn't have mistreated him. People dragged him through the streets and beat him to death.* 'The past is past,' Beowulf replies.

All the while, the camera shifts between a close-up of his face and images of their meal, spread out on the table before them. This restraint ensures that his mother's words pack

a powerful punch, while her son's apparently callous response comes as a shock. The generational divide is laid bare. But, as Torrens explains, Beowulf's response is, in some ways, an understandable reaction to both the horror of the past and the promise of the future. "The problem, some of those young people tell me, is that "we don't know what we don't know" (and they're not quoting Donald Rumsfeld),' he jokes.

We can have the latest Japanese fashions; we can have the latest American music; we can see everything on the internet, but we don't know what they're hiding from us' (...) The Cultural Revolution isn't studied or analysed in any deep way in high schools and universities. So, as you can imagine, young people, particularly those born in the 1980s and later, have no interest in it. They might know that their parents and grandparents had terrible times in the past, but that's as much as they want to know (...) And, often, the parents and grandparents don't discuss it: first, because the young people aren't interested and second, because it's so painful. There's so much guilt. So many acts of betrayal and humiliation were put upon others by their generation.

One man said to me, 'You in the West might think that it's good for China to open up its past, teach it and study it for the benefit of the future, but (those in power here) don't care what you think in the West. There is no logic in them looking back. The leaders always say that we must look forward, not back (...) And that's why, when you ask people if they think things will change under the new leadership, they say, "New shoes, same old road."

However, the subjects of *China's 3Dreams* seem to have found plenty of point in breaking out of silence. When Torrens returned to China to show the film to his subjects, it proved both healing and stimulating. It was not only the screening that had an impact, but also what it enabled: family members who hadn't seen one another for more than thirty-five years reunited over the common experience of viewing.

It was a wonderful and quite emotional visit (...) Zhang Lei's parents had not seen each other since she was very small, when they separated. There were extraordinary long discussions and meals, together with former Red Guards and rebels, and very emotional responses. After all, Zhang Lei's parents witnessed her discussions about her parents' neglect and incompetence because of the Cultural Revolution. I sat between her father and mother, who said not a word to each other, but responded to the film afterwards in separate ways.

One of the big points, which caused most discussion among the audience, was over the way the story was told. Agreement was that it was a 'real movie' when many had expected a 'Western documentary where a Western presenter tells you everything'. They were grateful. 'It is real and true, and every voice is a Chinese voice.'

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ⁱ Carey, P. 2001, *30 days in Sydney: a wildly distorted account*, Bloomsbury, New York, US.

ⁱⁱ Deng Xiaoping was a leader of the Chinese Communist Party between 1978 and 1992. He encouraged extensive reforms, leading China towards a market economy.