

FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
SÉLECTION OFFICIELLE 2024

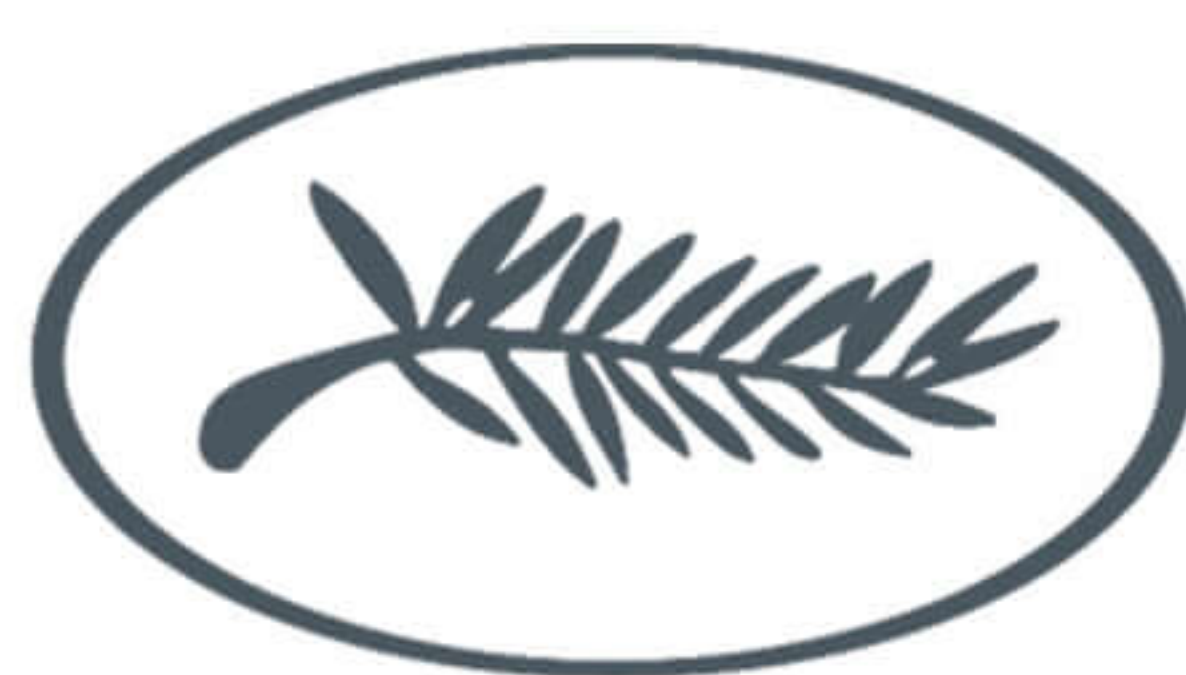
BLACK DOG

UN FILM DE GUAN HU

狗阵



THE SEVENTH ART PICTURES PRESENTS



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China – 2024 – 110min – 1:2.47 – 5.1 – Chinese language

SYNOPSIS

Ten years ago in a small town in Northwest China.

After a decade-long absence, a cynical Lang returns to his hometown to spend out his remaining years. In order to make ends meet, Lang's old friend Nie arranges for him to join the town's dog patrol team, where he spends his days transporting stray dogs in a truck.

When a part-wolf black dog comes into his life, Lang is moved by the dog's ability to survive against the odds. Lang and the dog gradually develop an emotional bond and become kindred spirits.

After deliberately repressing his feelings for years, Lang's sense of courage and masculinity return to him, along with a reawakened sense of compassion. He decides it is time to take action, not only to save as many stray dogs as he can, but also to fight for the redemption of his soul.

LOGLINE:

On the edge of the Gobi Desert in Northwest China, Lang returns to his hometown after being released from jail. While working for the local stray dog patrol team, clearing the town before the 2008 Olympic Games, he strikes up an unlikely connection with a black dog. These two lonely souls now embark on a new journey together.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Renowned Chinese director Guan Hu graduated from the Department of Directing of the Beijing Film Academy. He is seen as one of China's most assertive directors by both domestic and international film critics. Filled with humanistic concern and realism critique, his works possess a strong personal style, characterised by sharp and uniquely innovative perspectives, vividly realistic cinematography and detailed audio-visual craftsmanship to accurately convey ordinary people's perceptions and scrutiny of society and the world. He is regarded as one of the pioneers of the sixth generation of Chinese film directors.

Guan Hu made his mark on the international film scene in the early stages of his career with his representative work "Cow" (2009), winning the Best Adapted Screenplay Award at the 46th Golden Horse Film Awards for its absurd dark comedy. The film was also selected for the Horizons programme at the Venice International Film Festival. In 2012, his film "Design of Death" combined dark comedy with elements of suspense and employed more extreme techniques to achieve a greater level of self-expression.

In 2013, his iconic work "The Chef, the Actor, the Scoundrel" was seen as a new type of Chinese film with its strong oriental texture and experimental techniques. In 2015, his film "Mr. Six" resonated with and drew attention from the Chinese diaspora with its unique characters and portrayal of the impact of social changes. It became China's first box-office phenomenon, grossing over 1 billion Chinese yuan, and was not only the closing film of the Venice Film Festival but also won numerous domestic and international awards.

Guan Hu was also one of the directors of the 2019 film "My People, My Country," released globally to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. The film broke the box-office record for commemorative films, grossing 3 billion yuan. Guan Hu's segment "The Eve", was greeted with great acclaim for showcasing the spirit of Chinese culture through a specific story. In 2020, his war epic "The Eight Hundred," which took eight years to make, became a super-phenomenon and was global box office champion of the year. He also co-directed "The Sacrifice", released in 2020, made to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the Chinese People's Volunteer Army's participation in the Korean War.

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

At the start of the 21st century, China's economic growth and social change were at their peak. Frankly speaking, what took only thirty years in China would have taken over a hundred years in another country or another era. Everyone benefited from this transformation, but in that rapid process of change it was inevitable that some things would get lost or be forgotten, or that the wave of development would impact those who were outpaced by the speed of change.

When we get to a once-prosperous but now forgotten town and see a person who was once on his knees but is now trying to stand up on his own two feet again, we observe Lang as he comes across another lonely soul – a fast-running black dog that triggers the animal inside him. Human beings all have an animal side to them, even if it has been suppressed for a long time. Lang decides to stand up and run again...

We are pointing the camera lens at things that a lot of films overlook and focusing on rare individuals who have managed to rebuild a sense of dignity. We believe this is crucial to the future and the future of this community. These people may be in the minority, but they are still a part of us. If we look back a few years later and realise there is value in this, then we can also say that this is the value of cinema.

Questions & Answers

WITH DIRECTOR GUAN Hu

1. Many people say that Director Guan Hu's films do not adhere to one consistent style. They encompass both realistic expression as well as abstract representation. Which category does "Black Dog" fall into?

"Black Dog" falls more into the category of authorial expression. It is based on observations of the changes that have occurred in Chinese society over the past twenty years, as well as a manifestation of the ups and downs of an individual's existence after a period of contemplation.

2. You often include animal-like elements in your films. I'm thinking of the white horse in "The Eight Hundred" or the ostrich in "Mr. Six" or the cow in the film "Cow". Now in "Black Dog" there is a stray dog. Are these attempts to express the state of individuals through symbolism and metaphors?

Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that there is an animal in every human being. That "animalness" has always existed in the lives of individuals and can be manifested through a fearless courage or a daring challenge to authority. But as one grows, this animalistic nature can become dormant, which is a huge shame.

3. The character Lang has been marginalized by society, while the stray black dog at his side also lacks an identity and is about to be forsaken by the world. Are Lang and the black dog mirrors of each other?

To put it another way, they are two lonely souls in similar circumstances who lean on each other for support. There is an ancient Chinese legend that tells the story of the Erlang deity (name that inspired the character Lang in the film), who is often depicted with a long thin dog by his side as he walks the Heavens. I am sure the Erlang deity leads a much nicer life in the lonely Heavens with the long thin dog as his companion.

4. There are few female characters in the film, but the character Grape, portrayed by actress Tong Liya, seems to have a significant impact on the growth of the main character, even though she appears in only a few scenes. Many people say your films do not have many female characters, but the ones they do have play a pivotal role. Is this a fair assessment?

I am in awe of female roles. They often represent the resilient and mature side of my own life. In this story, the way Grape imagines and describes life is mature. She has a similar kind of pull on Lang as an older sister might have. I am sure Lang can sense her strong determination regarding her future, but that kind of predestined life is probably not what Lang needs at that point in time.

5. Eddie Peng's appearance and performance are transformative in this film. Why did you choose him to play Lang?

There is an animal-like naivety about him, which he still has to this day. That's not something you come across every day.

6. There is a scene in "Black Dog", where everyone stops what they are doing to go and watch a solar eclipse. It is a very romantic scene. Can you talk about why you included this scene?

First of all, a solar eclipse actually did occur around that time in Northwest China and it was seen as an auspicious omen. At the same time, in "Black Dog", I was hoping that the moon and sun shining together and the earth and heavens becoming one would allow the main character to externalise the changes happening inside him. We want him to stand up on his own two feet again and embrace the changes he's going through.

7. There is a very memorable scene in "Black Dog", where the animals in the zoo all escape and start to wander the streets of the empty town with the stray dogs, while the townsfolk are gathered on the hill to watch the solar eclipse. What was the message you were trying to convey with this scene?

As heaven and earth become one, in a world free of human interference, the animals have gained a temporary freedom. I'm sure Lang would have wanted that.

8. When writing "On the Road" in the 1950s, Jack Kerouac once said something along the lines of: "People long for the road because they are young". When it comes to the character Lang, what is it that motivates him to hit the road again?

Jack Kerouac also said: "O ever youthful, o ever weeping!" The rhythm of life and eternal desire drive the still-young Lang to find his own dignity as a human being. A routine, monotonous life is stifling him, so he needs to stand up again and set off on a new journey before it suffocates him. I remember Jack Kerouac writing: "We gotta go, and never stop going till we get there."

Questions & Answers

WITH PRODUCER LIANG Jing

1. The story in the film "Black Dog" is set in a town full of stray dogs. The Chinese title "Gou Zhen" is roughly the equivalent of "Dog Camp" in English. How do you interpret the title?

"Zhen" in Chinese (meaning "camp") hints at being stuck somewhere, and this is linked to Lang's predicament. He has been shackled and he can see the end of his life in front of him, as if everything were predestined. He needs to find a way to break out of the "camp", because only by doing that can he lead a new life. But this requires a lot of courage. Every society can become a "camp" and every individual finds themselves in predicaments. It is up to us to find a way out.

2. Director Guan Hu's works are often able to portray a spirit that is lacking in our current world through his stylized narratives, and this creates a powerful emotional resonance. Can you talk about the values that "Black Dog" is trying to convey to audiences from a creative perspective?

Life deprives us of things, but also gives us gifts. The important thing is we need to muster the courage to reset, start over and set out on our journey again. I hope "Black Dog" can make audiences feel like "if there is light, they can follow the light; if there is no light, then they can become the light".

3. In recent years you have been involved in many films as a producer, and many of those films won awards in international film festivals, raising your profile both in China and internationally. What are your expectations for "Black Dog"?

It is wonderful to have films I have worked on as producer achieve recognition through professional awards. Those awards belong to all the hardworking people who worked on the films. Frankly speaking, we do not have especially high expectations that "Black Dog" will get an award, because that was not our initial intention when we set out to make this film. Our aspirations are more to capture the pulse of our times through the camera lens, to document social realities through film, and create something that provokes awareness and social introspection. That is our responsibility as filmmakers.

4. Production often means having to juggle funding and artistic creation. As producer of "Black Dog" and Director Guan Hu's wife, is it more difficult to balance the conflict between art and money?

No, because when I'm in work mode I tend to ignore my family (chuckles)! Every film I work on with Guan Hu has a clear work division. As the director he is in charge of artistic creation and I am responsible for commercial decisions as producer. We discuss issues in depth at the start of each project and establish a clear target and vision for the film. I try to establish what his creative intentions and aesthetic needs are, so that I can provide reasonable suggestions and the necessary support. Director Guan Hu also respects my commercial decisions and tries to strike a balance between the artistic and commercial aspects of a project. This applies not only to my husband Guan Hu, but also to many people in our team with whom I have worked for many years. We are like family in life, but they all understand the way I work. I never let my personal life interfere with my work.

5. "Black Dog" pays tribute to "all those who have hit the road again". You started your career as an actor and then became a producer. You have also been an executive producer. Every new role that you play in a film implies starting afresh. What is it that sustains your resolve to "set out on a new journey again"?

Every new transition is triggered by a different reason. At times it was down to a bottleneck in my career and I wanted a new opportunity, and at other times it was simply because I was interested in doing something different or because I wanted to fulfil a sense of self-worth. But these motivations are all superficial. The main reason that has led me to constantly transition and "hit the road again" is my deeply held passion for cinema. It is only when you truly love something that you are constantly trying to delve deeper, experiment and explore. Picasso once said something along the lines of: "passion is an irreplaceable force, which can help you get over the most difficult testing times in your life." I'm very grateful for that passion because it has made me braver and helped me persevere in life. It has also made my life more intense.

Questions & Answers

WITH D O P GAO Weizhe

1. The images and colours in "Black Dog" have a cold green effect, giving a calm feel to the film. What is the "background colour" of the film?

The "background colour" of the story stems from the silence of nature. It is like a serene light that reaches straight into the heart, encompassing our objective depiction of reality in a particular time and space, while also harbouring a reverence for the universe and all living beings within it.

2. How did you decide the audiovisual style of the film? Did you discuss this with Director Guan Hu beforehand?

During the preparatory phase of the project, I discussed the visual tone of "Black Dog" with Director Guan Hu on multiple occasions and we came to an initial consensus. We later made a final decision after we had selected the shooting locations. One evening we were traveling from one location to another and as the car drove through the Gobi Desert with the Qilian Mountains up ahead, I looked out of the window and saw the moon hanging in the sky on the edge of the distant mountains. The moonlight illuminated the ridges of the rugged landscape, casting shadows that resembled jagged teeth. That moment conjured up in my mind images of an ancient Chinese poem: "The moon was bright like in the Qin dynasty, and the frontier remained the same as in the Han dynasty." Both our forebearers and ourselves, who will eventually also disappear from this earth, all lived under the same moonlight and in the same surrounding wilderness. I could not wait to share this sense of time and space that I wanted to convey in the film with Director Guan Hu. To my surprise, he had the same idea in mind. He smiled and said that the story of "Black Dog" would unfold on this beautiful expanse of the Gobi Desert before us.

3. And yet it was precisely in such a beautiful place that you decided to focus the camera on the lower rungs of society, the predicament people find themselves in during these times, as well as the fate of those on the fringes of society?

All the imagery revolves around the story. When looking out at the wilderness, everything is transformed quietly by time, whether it is the natural environment or human-altered landscapes. Time transforms grapes into wine, life ebbs away with time and comes back again with time. What the imagery in the film is trying to achieve is akin to the objectivity of time – the camera treats every person and every landscape that is changed by time equally and without bias.

4. Some would say that imagery in "Black Dog" gives the audience an experience of observation rather than immersion. Do you agree?

For the people living in this landscape, choosing the way in which you witness life there is more significant than participation or intervention. The puffy white clouds leisurely passing by, the quiet light and general silence of the landscape can speak volumes. The film is a vehicle that elegantly and quietly exposes us to the inner turbulence the people of this land are experiencing, and that turbulence can bring about a powerful emotional resonance.

Questions & Answers

WITH A C T O R Eddie PENG

1. Tell us about how you came to work on "Black Dog". What motivated you to take on this film?

I have long admired director Guan Hu's work and always wanted to work with him. The opportunity to work on "Black Dog" came at an important juncture in my life. I hadn't acted in nearly two years due to the pandemic. Instead, I spent time with my family, embraced new hobbies, and experienced a different way of living. My world view and outlook on life changed. It was around this time that I got a hold of the script. When I read it, I immediately recognized this was a project I wanted to do. I couldn't pass it up. The script is outstanding: a profound exploration of life's complexities and the essence of the human condition. It evoked strong emotions in me, and I knew committing to this film would not only challenge me personally, but also push me to reach new heights professionally.

2. Some say "Black Dog" is your most groundbreaking performance since you entered the entertainment business. What do you think of that comment? What was the biggest obstacle you faced during the filming and how did you overcome it?

I've never attempted a character like Lang before. As with previous films, I prepared by immersing myself in researching and building the backstory for my character. When we started shooting "Black Dog," I realized the process was not at all what I imagined because I couldn't predict how the dogs would perform. As a result, I had to abandon all the preparation I did beforehand and be fully immersed in the present of each scene, each take and let my natural instincts take over.

During the filming process, I experienced moments of helplessness, self-doubt and even fear because I didn't know if my performance was up to par. The dog, who was playing opposite of me, was essentially the only thing that I could draw upon to believe I was Lang. The dog can only be real and authentic. Consequently, the director said he didn't want to detect a single trace of "actor" in me because he also wanted my character to be real and authentic. In my career so far, I've never been in a movie where I had to deal with so much uncertainty and unknown. The only thing I could go off on was the reactions from the dog. "Black Dog" changed my cerebral understanding of moviemaking and expanded my understanding of the acting process.

Before the filming, I had a chance to learn about dog training. I spent time with over a dozen dogs so I could develop a bond with them. To make sure we could pull off one-take shots, we rehearsed multiple times. In addition, I also had to learn different motorcycle stunts that were more like acrobatic moves. The nonstop daily practices were grueling, but once I was able to drill it in my head and the skills became part of my muscle memory, that's when I could really make these stunts my own.

3. Combined with your understanding of Lang as a person, how did you interpret the complexity of his inner world?

The film delves into the realm of magical realism, unfolding the tale of a shattered individual seeking redemption in a desolate, downtrodden city. Had I read the script 10 years ago, it probably would not have stirred strong emotions in me. But now, as I am approaching 40, it was easy for me to empathize with Lang and his journey. The solitude enforced by the pandemic provided opportunities for introspection, reshaping my outlook on life. It was amidst this period of reflection that I read the script. Interacting with the character Lang at such a pivotal juncture enabled me to interpret his struggles through the lens of my newfound wisdom. I could identify his feelings of being a misfit in the new world. While everyone else around him kept moving forward, Lang lost so many years. The character I play is weak and confused, but those were also the emotions I dealt with in real life at that time. Both the director and I were committed to exploring these profound themes and emotions, even at the expense of commercial considerations. Our dedication to exploring these vital aspects of life reflected the same courage embodied by Lang.

4. "Black Dog" is centered on the story of a man and a dog. They are independent of each other, yet fate has banded them together. How would you describe their relationship?

They are one and the same. They are both struggling, fighting, seeking to survive in their own circumstances. The dog serves as a mirror to Lang. When Lang wants to take on the world again and live, it is the dog that provides him with the strength he needs. Conversely, Lang ignites the dog's spirit and stirs its instinct to survive.

5. Grape seems to be a ray of light that shines into Lang's messy and dim life. In your view, does Grape change the course of Lang's life? How would you describe Lang's feelings for her?

Lang's childhood home had a small vineyard so to him, grapes symbolize the tender memories between him and his father. The appearance of Grape was like a gush of freshwater flowing through the black Gobi Desert. It triggered a ripple effect in Lang's otherwise lonely life and revived his hope for the future. In the eyes of Lang, Grape embodied freedom, life, courage, and purity. He admired her for these qualities and her unapologetic candor. Lang longed to live as carefree as Grape, with the same energy and zest for life.

6. This is your first time collaborating with Director Guan Hu. How was it like working with him and how would you rate him?

Director Guan Hu is without a doubt, one of the most outstanding directors in China and there's no need for me to rate him. I am honored to have been a part of his movie. Perhaps my character reflects Guan's inner world. Perhaps Lang is the conduit that Guan uses to converse with the world, and through my performance, the dialogue was completed. I learned that Guan is meticulous about details of the story, and he set a very high bar for his actors. Nevertheless, he still gave me plenty of room and freedom to mold the character as I see fit. Ultimately, I am very grateful to have had the chance to create such a beautiful, artistic film with this team. It was not easy for us to film under harsh conditions of the Gobi Desert. For example, we lived without cell phone reception for months. But these challenges also enabled us to fully immerse ourselves in the story of "Black Dog" and thereby produce a more authentic film. In all ways, "Black Dog" for me was an experience of a lifetime, a truly rare moviemaking journey that has profoundly enriched and sharpened my craft as an actor.

THE SEVENTH ART PICTURES

The Seventh Art Pictures was co-founded by the well-known Chinese director Guan Hu and the famous producer and actress Liang Jing. The company brings together top talent from the film and television industry to deliver high-quality development, investment, production and distribution of films and TV series, as well as artist, director and screenwriter management.

After its global release in 2020, company founder Guan Hu's film "The Eight Hundred" grossed 3.11 billion Chinese yuan at the box office, becoming global box office champion for feature-length dramas in 2020. The combined box office earnings of three of his films, "The Sacrifice", "My People, My Country" and "Mr. Six" reached 5.2 billion yuan.

Apart from commercial filmmaking, The Seventh Art Pictures takes a particular interest in social, human and realism themes and actively supports young directors. The company has signed contracts with over 10 talented film and television directors, garnering huge acclaim at various major domestic and international film festivals.

Since its establishment in 2016, the company has produced dozens of high-quality films on various genres and thousands of episodes of TV dramas. One of its most notable productions, "The Weasel Grave" series, was produced in collaboration with Tencent Video and accumulated over 12 billion views, making it one of China's leading online dramas.



CAST

Eddie PENG
TONG Liya
JIA Zhangke
ZHANG Yi
ZHOU You

CREW

PRESENTED BY/EXECUTIVE PRODUCER: LIANG Jing
DIRECTOR: GUAN Hu
STORY: GUAN Hu
SCREENPLAY: GUAN Hu / GE Rui / WU Bing
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY: GAO Weizhe
SOUND SUPERVISOR: FU Kang
PRODUCTION DESIGNER: HUO Tingxiao
STYLING DIRECTOR: LI Zhou
MUSIC SUPERVISOR: YU Fei
ORIGINAL SCORE: BRETON VIVIAN
EDITING CONSULTANTS: Matthieu LACLAU / HE Yongyi
PRODUCER: Zhu Wenjiu
CO-PRODUCER: Justine O. / WANG Donghui

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