

*Fir*, the graduation film of Yang Xueni, is an intimate film about a young girl of Chinese ancestry living in the Czech Republic dealing with questions of belonging and family. It uses a basic dramatic structure to set up a delicate portrayal of Shan, the young girl, that combines thematic and character questions quite engagingly. Unfortunately the basic dramatic structure also forces upon the story some leaps in character logic.

The film shows us an encounter between Shan, the young girl, and an unnamed Young Man, a Chinese student. The focus is on the characters and the subtle poetics of the moments between them and here is where the film is at its strongest. An otherwise mundane scene in the apartment of the Young Man where they have noodles is turned into an evocative scene of belonging and budding friendship. Played out from Shan's perspective and with deliberate pacing, the scene captures the dilemmas and internal struggles of the main character.

This approach continues in the following scene in the woods, where the intimate portrait of the new friendship is expanded upon, showing the games they play together in a certain bittersweet mood. These scenes are the emotional core of the film and the director has done an amazing job of capturing these cinematically and in their work with the actors, bringing together the themes and the vulnerabilities of the characters.

But while the central scenes of the film are very strong, the beginning and the ending have some notable weaknesses. The beginning set up the thematic question of Shan up in a very efficient way. By the way she behaves at home with her mother and the way her day at school with her friends go give us a good introduction to her and her world, but the flip side is that the introduction is too set on efficiency and less on the up-close exploration of Shan as a living character. One of the decisions that she takes is to go help the Young Man find his apartment and then stay there. The question that raises here is why does Shan stay at the stranger place? While it is addressed in the film, with the Young Man asking bluntly why she stays, it seems what is given is an excuse, not an answer. While there may be many valid answers for her choice, the pacing of the beginning and the moments shown don't give enough context to fully follow her action. This is in stark contrast to how she is shown later.

Another weak point is the portrayal of the Mother. While she is shown only twice, at the beginning and at the end, her actions and reactions seems to be more mechanical, being on the border of neglectful, which seems to almost go against Shan's story. While in the beginning the scene with the Mother serves the set up of the world very well, the scene towards the end, when she has a dramatic scene with her daughter has her character come out flat and to a point confusing.

While the portrayal of the Mother might be a weak point, one of the strengths of the director in the film is the portrayal of Shan as well as the Young Man. The performances throughout the film are very strong with the director managing to get very powerful performances with subdued vulnerability. Directing the actors and the choice and blocking of the scenes are all highlights.

The overall dramaturgy is subtle and efficient, there to give space to the intimate poetic moments between Shan and the Young Man, which works well overall, but it also means some of the character choices at the beginning and the end which are needed for the narrative progression are lacking emotional context and confusing.

In conclusion *Fir* is a very engaging and well executed graduation film that manages to combine intimacy with wider themes in an impressive and artful way. While there are a few stumbling moment at the beginning and the end, the strengths of the film outweigh the shortcomings by a wide margin.

With these notes I can recommend Yang Xueni's film *Fir* for defense and recommend the overall grade of A for it.

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