

IFFI

Goa Film Festival

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The 40th International Film Festival of India at Goa (Nov/Dec,09) was full of pleasurable movies and right images. Indian Panorama, Cinema of the World, Competition Films, Tributes to Manoel de Oliveira (Portugal), Gurinder Chadha (UK), Joao Batista (Brazil), Roland Reber (Germany) and Nonzee Numbutr (Thailand), were variations of unique visions. Entertainment and accuracy are combined in He Ping's "Wheat" (China, 2009, colour,108 mins), a historical account of China in 260 B.C. Around a horse cart, children are singing in fields. A land owing girl meets the village women. Title cards intersperse, describing the time. 'Day of Gold' ushers thunder and rains. It is festive day for the town of Liyu. In the kingdom of Zhao, Lady Li (Fan Bing Bing) marries Lord Ju Cong (Wang Xue Qi), with a ritual wedding, and drinking from earthen vessels. The silk strings on the bride's head are united by the groom. A letter from King Zhao arrives proclaiming invasion by the Qin Kindom. Every male over age of twelve years would have to join the campaign for defence of the city. Lord Ju Cong leaves for battle. Wife Lady Li is forlorn, as she greets a sparrow. When a water vessel falls, it bodes ill.. Lady Li runs to a soothsayer. 'Day of Wood' brings shadows of clouds over forest. At day break, soldiers are ready with spears and swords. Lord Ju Cong thinks it is time to go home for harvest.

There are desertions. An overhead fast track follows a soldier running through the fields. He is challenged by another peasant with a sword. There are sword duels and beheadings near a royal chariot. Xie (Huang Jue), a strong soldier throws away his sword, and walks through the fields, followed by a weak soldier, Shochai. Xie feels that harvest comes first, before war and the winning side. The Zhao and Qin kings order all absentees to be annihilated. Chased by soldiers, Xie and Shaochi run. Rapid pans follow the deserters through wheat fields. They jump from a cliff, on to a rushing stream. 'Day of Water' begins with a pan over a stream. The two soldiers lie on a river bank, without clothes. Village women put them on a cart, and pull them to the village, as they lie unconscious. At night they are scratched with needles. A Quin arrow is pulled from Shochi's shoulders. The villagers mistake the soldiers as Zhao warriors, and the village women jubilate when they hear of stories of Zhao victories. The deserters pretend to be Zhao warriors. But the village soothsayer woman has suspicions that the features of the two soldiers, do not resemble Zhao men.

The two men claim to be from Wusai City. The royal ladies want to know whether the Zhao army has defeated the Qin army. Xie's descriptions of battle field operations, and formations spread among the village girls. Food and wine are provided to the deserters. Xie continues to relate stories of wielding swords and bravery. The deserters collapse in torpor. The scenario shifts to prisoners of war locked up in camps. The spectacle of battle depicts swords, armour, charges and surrender, beheadings, and bodies being dragged to a river. Heads are piled in high platforms. In Liyu town, the Zhao women carry the two drunk soldiers, strip them and caress their bodies. A princess takes Xie's

hand, and leads him to her chamber. Xie pours water on the princess's clothes and touches her body. In 'Day of Fire' the soothsayer recalls that in the olden days, Zhao triumphs were proclaimed throughout the land. Weak Shochai has nightmares of being killed. Xie has forgotten what he had related at night. Shochai wants to kill all the ugly women in the village. All the village men have been killed in war. Farming, labour and banishment await the deserters in Qin. Xie plays a guessing game with Shochai, hiding a locket in his hands.

Bandits invade the village, and the women run, after informing Lady Li. The two deserters hide. The bandits announce that all Zhao men have been killed by the Qin army. When a baby cries, the bandit chief barges into a room, kills a woman, and picks up the baby. The bandits demand that Lady Li kneel before the chief bandit, Lord Cheng. Lady Li requests for the child, and refuses to kneel. The other village women also refuse to kneel. Xie and Shochai, from their hiding, emerge with swords, and fight duels with the bandits. The women join the clashes, with wooden spikes and shovels. The bandits are defeated, and the bandit king kills himself. The baby is rescued. The village women beat up the other bandits. The soothsayer plays on bones, skulls and bells, but cannot see light nor order. Mist of obscurity prevails. Lady Li is in dilemma - whether to trust the word of the soldiers or the bandits. The bandits flee, and harvesting continues.

The village women chase the two warriors, when they try to run away. They are caught and stripped. The women plea that the warriors should not return to Wusai. The soothsayer is convinced that Zhao soldiers have been defeated.

The imagination of the deserters and the reality of war work together, Zhao Xiaosih's camera ensures the cinematic effects of the frame shifts between ancient war, women without men in a besieged town, and golden harvests of the fields. The screenplay has a convincing cohesion. □□□