

Critique

Pradip Biswas

Boat People: Ann Hui's Saga of Scary War



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Ann Hui is a major female director from Hong Kong. She was born in China but later on, shifted to Hong; she, along with others, came to start a new wave cinema in Hong Kong, and this is not all; she made the first new wave films, such as *Boat People*, with a topical reality and harsh sensitivity. The *Tau ban no hoi/Boat People* (1982 Hong Kong/China) is of 106 minutes duration. *Boat People* was the first Hong Kong movie filmed in Communist China. *Boat People* is a kind of metaphor; it shelters, protects, and takes care of myriad lives of many hues war-torn Vietnam.

Ann Hui On-wah is a film director, producer, screenwriter and actress, one of the most critically acclaimed Hong Kong New

Wave filmmakers. She is known for her films about social issues in Hong Kong, which include literary adaptations, martial arts, semi-autobiographical works, women's issues, social phenomena, political changes, and thrillers. She served as the president of the Hong Kong Film Directors' Guild from 2004 to 2006.

In the wake of the Vietnam War in 1975, many people endeavoured to escape the country, with the primary method available being by boat. It is estimated that on top of the 800,000 people who safely arrived in another country, a large number of refugees, almost as many as those who survived, did not. Said Ann Hui: "Admittedly, when I first put my hand up to write about this film – while I

thought it would be emotionally heavy to do so – I thought that the process of writing this piece would be a little more straightforward, based on my perception of what a film called *Boat People* might be about. I thought about what I had learnt so far from my family members, family friends, and the families of my friends about the experience of being a “boat person”. She thought about the conversations she was lucky to have in the motherland, which broadened my understanding of what it would have been like to live in post-war Vietnam. As such, she was prepared to write a piece informed by these ideas and what the experience of watching Ann Hui’s *Boat People* (1982) helped to inform. Upon watching this film, one realised it was far more layered. Simply put, *Boat People* demand more than a sole perspective through its contextual and structural foundation as a film in the international festival sphere written and directed by a filmmaker from Hong Kong; it was filmed in mainland China about “the reality” of a re-unified Socialist Vietnam after the end of the war, still very fresh impacts of conflict.

Prior to *Boat People*’s presence in the international circuit, viewing the film as a political allegory for Hong Kong’s situation at the time became an incidental response. Locating *Boat People* in the context of real-world historical events, it was released 7 years after the Fall of Saigon, 7 years before the events of May 35th, and 15 years before the handover of Hong Kong to China from British colonial rule.

Suffice it to say, for a director hailing from Hong Kong, there would have been a lot going on. In an interview in 1982, the year

that the film was released, as well as when discussions began between Britain and China about Hong Kong’s future status. Hui professed, “I really do not understand politics. I don’t know if it’s too simple, so I don’t care to understand it, or if it’s too complicated, so I can’t understand it”. While these words were said, it is hard to believe them to be truly felt by the director, as the film accentuates the impacts of prolonged conflict and the hardship and poverty that has ruined the small country.

Ka-Fai Yau speaks to an unconscious political dimension that Hui’s films include due to the nuanced political context of hailing from Hong Kong during this period. Thus, while the film was supposed to mainly humanise Vietnamese refugees who were migrating to Hong Kong, there was a latent political allegory that was consciously felt by viewers in Hong Kong concerning the future impact of the handover and the weight and change that it would perhaps carry. Vinh Nguyen identifies the inability of the film to humanise the Vietnamese refugees in lieu of Hong Kong viewers’ perspectives on their anxieties. Still, one feels this would have been difficult to avoid.

The film’s central character is Akutagawa (George Lam), a Japanese photographer invited by the Vietnamese government to document the country’s supposed “post-war successes”. Akutagawa serves as almost a proxy for Hui’s outsider perspective of Vietnam, and this is represented several times throughout the film when Akutagawa’s camera lens serves as a POV. It is illustrated from the outset that the protagonist holds a nuanced political viewpoint, having lost his family at the hands

of WWII, as a Japanese person impacted by America. Therefore, he adopts a political approach concerned with understanding the reality of the war from at least a neutral perspective. As such, his search for the “real Vietnam” is more of a curiosity than a conspiracy. The film initially intended to centre itself more on the experience of being and becoming a boat person, following Andy Lau’s character, To Minh, as he makes a concerted effort to raise the money he needs to flee the country. This shift leads to the film being more about how and why one might want or need to escape Vietnam rather than the experience of being a boat person.

Opening with an arresting sequence of a photographer darting in and out of a crowd of Vietnamese watching the Viet Cong parade down the streets of Da Nang in 1975, the film jumps immediately forward three years to show the same photographer's return trip to the nation. He's a Japanese journalist named Akutagawa (George Lam), and he is on assignment to document the new Vietnam in all its communist splendour and splash.

1990, one of her most important works, the semi-autobiographical *The Song of Exile*, was released. The film looks into the loss of identity, disorientation, and despair faced by an exiled mother and a daughter who are faced with clashes in culture and historicity. As in the film, Hui's mother was Japanese. After a brief hiatus in which she returned briefly to television, Hui returned with *Summer Snow* (1995), about a middle-aged woman trying to cope with everyday family problems and an Alzheimer-inflicted father-in-law. In 1996, she was a jury member at the 46th Berlin International Film Festival.

As a queer drama, the film does not shy away from depicting the brutality of the situation. In researching for the film, Hui gathered information from a variety of accounts from displaced Vietnamese people to feature scenes of this desperation as accurately as possible, Hui depicts situations of poverty that involve young children scrounging through debris at risk of detonating land mines to find items of value, looking through pockets of dead bodies to find money, picking up food that has dropped on the floor in order to feed one’s family among other acts of desperation. This allows the film to thoroughly illustrate why there were so many boat people and, thus, so many people who felt compelled to escape from Vietnam.

The film leaves us at a stage of uncertainty and grimy hope. Many boat people ended up on processing islands! Hui said: "I have even heard from one of my parent’s friends whom he met at Bidong Island in Malaysia, that the time spent – while waiting to understand what the next stage of their life might look like– was a reflection of the best time of their life, with so much hoped for their future, so much unknown, whilst being treated well by the inhabitants of the island. Unsurprisingly, these words stuck with Hui. As the son of a boat person, the scene in which To Minh’s journey ends reminds one of the errant thought Hui intermittently had of her privilege and luck that the parent was able to survive, that she was able to be here and write these words.

As the film advances, Akutagawa's increasing sense of horror at the unseen desperation and fear complexity of the

Vietnamese he was drawing close to drives him to greater and greater acts of complex intervention. The only solution is getting them out of the country; it is a saga of hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese who fled the nation in boats during the period. Akutagawa tried to work his neutral status to intervene on behalf of his friends.

Because in that passage of time, between escaping by boat and reaching a safe destination, anything could have happened, and there were countless people, unable to be identified, who lost their lives in that journey. How fortunate it was that so many people who chose to leave were able to have that opportunity to live a life after the war. Hui's film speaks with an earnest and honest attempt to humanise people who were displaced by an Imperialist war. May we keep striving to do so.

Akutagawa quickly realises he is being shown a carefully manicured facade -- singing children, smiling faces -- and starts negotiating with his minders for more opportunities to explore Da Nang on his recognisance. Remarkably, they agree, and in his undeterred perambulations, Akutagawa photographs and becomes captivated by a 14-year-old girl.

This is Cam Nuong (Season Ma), and it is through her and her family (two younger brothers and a mother who is a sex worker) that we, and Akutagawa, are able to peer beneath the veneer of Vietnam and its New Economic Zones, to witness the horror beneath.

In many a way, Akutagawa is merely a cipher, an ambulatory point-of-view camera who draws us into Cam Nuong's tale and lets us witness it. Justin Chang's excellent jacket

essay, "Persistence of Vision," draws attention to this stylistic technique by Hui, who interposes Akutagawa as a "neutral" presence as part of a larger critical approach to the layers of truth and deception in her story."

Season Ma's performance as Cam Nuong is the film's heart; however, it is never shy or precious but always with a keen sense of a lived and dynamic reality and ancient feelings marked by pragmatism that quickly dismissed Akutagawa's moral and psychological panic. She loots freshly executed bodies and begins the process of following her mother into sex work. Yet, in the film's lightest, most iconic, sequence, she can be photographed in the rain by Akutagawa, at one with her situation and surroundings.

However, Director Hui does not hold back on the violence of Cam Nuong's world. Her style is a documentarian only to a point, after which heightened, stylised bursts of traumas agonies the narrative and recontextualise everything in the preceding story. This is a bloody, disturbing film appropriate to its subject matter; some of the characters are conscripted to clear minefields with disastrous results, and a late-film flight for freedom is interrupted by a death so ghastly that it may well stay with the viewers forever.

Boat People was caught in an international relations stir when it came to the Cannes Film Festival in 1982; the French government, not wanting to disturb their relationship with post-colonial, postwar Vietnam, had the film pulled from the competition. It played as a special screening instead, and the attendant press conference is

recorded and provided on the Criterion Blu-ray as a special feature.

On a major theme being tackled in Hong Kong Cinema, Ann Hui says to Sarah Perks: “No, I think the new generation of filmmakers have a completely different set of problems, strengths and weaknesses. It's better for them to find their way out. For example, I've never tried to be Leni Riefenstahl! Finally, could you offer a brief

comment on the Visible Secrets: Hong Kong's Women Filmmakers season? Added she: “To be honest, I am not especially pleased to be slotted primarily as a "woman filmmaker"; but it's okay with me. Plus, I see the relevance and the strength of having a distinctive subject and drift for promotional purposes. Above all, I am glad that my films can be shown and watched in other parts of the world.”

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