

Lotus (Xiao He): Venice review

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Premiering in Critics' Week at Venice, producer/director/writer Liu Shu's debut stars Tan Zhuo as an idealistic schoolteacher in provincial China.

Cinema is rarely kind to teachers who are young, beautiful, inspirational and female, and the list that features Maggie Smith in *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* and Diane Keaton in *Looking For Mr. Goodbar* now also includes Tan Zhuo from Chinese indie parable *Lotus (Xiao He)*. With themes and a narrative structure that are straightforward to the point of being schematic, this is an engaging if ultimately depressing debut from 36-year-old writer/director/producer Liu Shu.

Her clear-eyed indictment of 21st century China presents deeply unflattering depictions of state education, the police system, journalism and private enterprise. And while the results certainly won't win her any state-sponsored accolades at home, they'll find plenty of takers among overseas festivals - especially events showcasing new talent - and even more so if her Venice premiere attracts any kind of official flak.

Having previously made an impact via secondary roles in two controversy-courting indie productions, Lou Ye's Cannes-awarded *Spring Fever* (2009) and Han Jie's *Hello Mr Tree* (2011), demurely pretty Tan now moves very much front and center in a picture where her eponymous heroine is present in just about every single scene. Single at 25, and living with her fretful, conventional parents, 'Miss Lotus' teaches high-school in an unidentified provincial town on the edge of the countryside.

Her free-spirited, questioning approach and unorthodox methods make her popular with most of her charges, but telling the kids that they "don't have to obey [their] parents or teachers" spells trouble with her employers. And when it emerges that she has been conducting an affair with an older, married man, the humiliated Lotus escapes to start a new life as a journalist in bustling Beijing. Further complications ensue.

No flower can thrive without a suitable environment and proper nourishment - not even the Lotus, whose stainless emergence from muddy ground has for centuries made it a symbol of purity in eastern religions. And it's quite hard to watch the radiance of this particular Lotus, initially so lively and upbeat, fading as she struggles to find her place in a go-ahead, unforgiving society. She descends the economic ladder via a series of sackings, her promising journalism career foundering when it emerges she's more interested in quizzing a veteran female cinematographer about her career under Chairman Mao than in following the "latest directives from the Central Propaganda Unit."

"The Cultural Revolution is off-limits" snaps Lotus's editor, who prefers to emphasize "entertainment and celebrity news." It's not just in China, of course, that free-thinking teachers come up against the strictures of an education system that prioritizes exam-results above all else, and Lotus's acute journalistic frustrations certainly

won't be unfamiliar to her counterparts in numerous western countries. But it's as a heartfelt, ultra-critical dispatch from this particular nation that Lotus exerts particular appeal and fascination, and while Liu's on-the-nose dialogue isn't exactly a subtle analysis of the status quo, her tart little fable neatly concludes with a coda that constitutes one of the sourest 'happy' endings we'll see in cinema this year.

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