

'Old Stone' ('Lao Shi'): Berlin Review

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Courtesy of Berlin International Film Festival
Solid debut fusing social-realist drama and noir.

Canadian-Chinese director Johnny Ma's debut depicts a small-town cabbie's descent into madness and crime after having his savings sucked dry in the aftermath of a traffic accident.

Defying its somewhat generic-sounding title, Johnny Ma's gripping criminal thriller *Old Stone* deploys powerful performances and eerie imagery to convey the moral breakdown of an upstanding taxi driver and the society from which he emerges — one in which people could actually buy [insurance to cover themselves from being sued by people they help on the street](#). Drawing on multiple genres — from Dardennes-style drama to jet-black noir — the pic is, at least in terms of Chinese independent cinema, a refreshing and solid debut from the Shanghai-born, Toronto-raised and New York-educated finance consultant-turned-filmmaker.

Backed by Chinese indie cinema doyenne Nai An — the producer of nearly all of [Lou Ye's](#) festival hits, while also a past winner of the best actress prize at Locarno with [When Night Falls](#) — this Sundance Institute-backed production will most probably roll onwards through the festival circuit after its bow at the Berlinale's Forum section. The film's next stop is the Hong Kong International Film Festival, where it is in the running for the Young Cinema Competition alongside a slew of other Berlin titles including [Life After Life](#), [Barakah Meets Barakah, I](#), [Olga Hepnarova](#), [Tomcat](#) and [Nakom](#).

Old Stone begins and ends with a red screen, a sign of the folly, fury and eventual bloodshed which drives the story, one inspired no doubt by the ceaseless reports in China about [drivers killing pedestrians they have hit](#) so as to avoid paying for the victims' long-term rehabilitation fees. And one such report is actually heard blaring from the radio at the film's opening sequence, as Lao Shi (Chen Gang) drives along crammed streets of a small Chinese city to shadow a motorcyclist. The pic then cuts to three months ago, when Shi finds himself fending for himself after a traffic accident downtown;

rather than taking flight, he stays, calls for help, goes to the hospital and pays the bills for the victim, somewhat believing he would be reimbursed by company insurance.

Shi's wheels gradually come off, however, as he discovers old-fashioned goodness doesn't pay in a society where procedures and cynicism reign supreme. Rather than getting a pat in the back for ferrying the dying victim to the hospital, Shi is cautioned by the police for leaving the scene, and then told by insurance executives how he might have undermined his own claims for actually helping the victim.

Learning of his victim's financial predicaments through phone conversations with the man's wife, Shi somehow continues footing those bills — and he soon discovers how he's a lone moralist plunged into a theater of cruelty, as his nursery-operator wife (Nai An), his boss (Wang Hongwei) and nearly everyone else turn their backs against what they believe as some kind of monstrous selflessness. Barely being able to hold himself together after losing his cab, his job and his family, Shi gradually succumbs to the cynicism around him, his descent into violence and crime becoming complete when he discovers how even victims can no longer be trusted in this day and age.

As the narrative unfolds, Ma regularly cuts to a quick shot of a forest, its trees swaying ominously in the wind. This could be a metaphor for the mob mentality around Shi, as the cabbie struggles (and fails) to defy peer pressure to conform to the cynical values of the present. But it may also be a visual flourish with which Ma hints at the horrors to come. Starting out steeped in social-realist drama, *Old Stone* gradually morphs into a full-blown psychological thriller, complete with a devastating denouement unfolding in a muddy field and on dark country lanes — a milieu d.p. Leung Ming-kai (*Mundane History, Murmur of the Hearts*) conveys as atmospherically as he did with the more simple grit of gloomy urban life towards the beginning of the film.

But the human beings matter here, as Chen has delivered a rugged turn as the wrong-headed and wronged Good Samaritan. Combined with the performances of the supporting cast — Nai's character embodying the self-preservation instinct through her efforts to stop her husband's good deeds, and Wang's representing the aggression key to survival in China's dog-eat-dog capitalist system — *Old Stone* lays bare how the country's foundering social fabric through an individual's descent into the dark recesses of his soul.

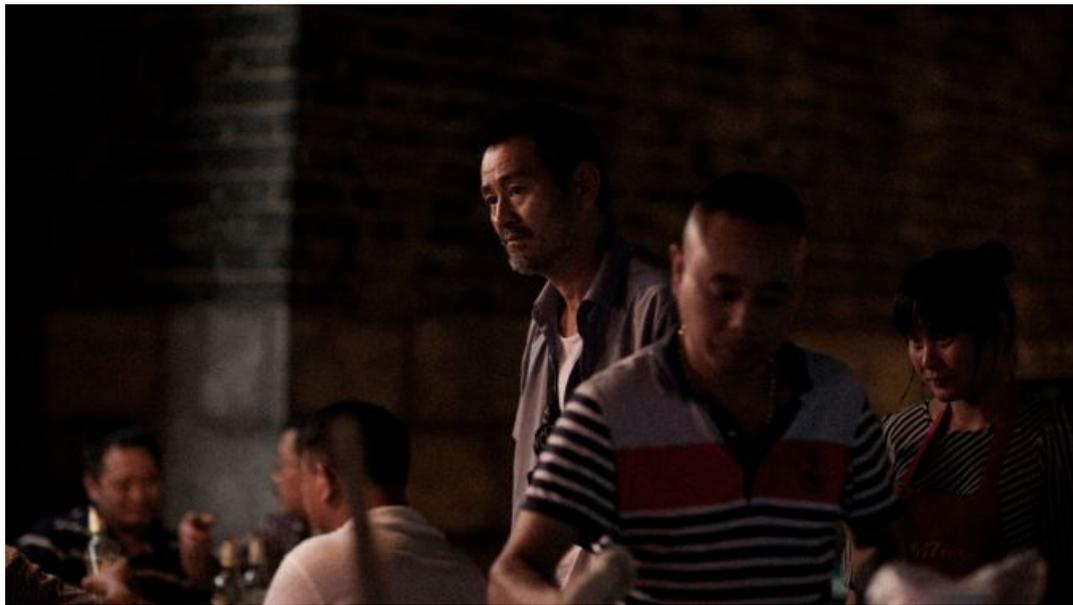
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VARIETY

Berlin Film Review: 'Old Stone'



[Maggie Lee](#)



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A Chinese taxi driver's scruples get him in hot water in Johnny Ma's excoriating debut feature.

In China, life is cheap but compassion is expensive — a message that “[Old Stone](#)” delivers with caustic power through a taxi driver’s misfortunes, following his refusal to follow custom and do a hit-and-run. Chinese-Canadian helmer-scribe Johnny Ma makes a remarkably mature debut, exposing with stunning clarity the infuriating red tape and flawed logic of China’s system regarding criminal responsibility and insurance policies. Even within a trim 79-minute running time, Ma affectingly dramatizes his protagonist’s moral quandary within a social milieu of spine-chilling callousness. Channeling the style of gritty mainland independent films but without the usual longueurs, the film deftly morphs into a suspense thriller with Dostoevskyan undertones; its provocative subject matter should give it long fest legs.

The prevalence of hit-and-runs in China caught national and then global attention in October 2011, when Wang Yue, a 2-year-old girl from Foshan, Guangdong province, was hit by a van which promptly backed up to run her over again before driving off. Eighteen passersby skirted around her, thus allowing another van to drive her over a third time. While such apathy suggests a society that’s crossed the line of basic humanity, Ma’s film explains the complex legal issues that push ordinary citizens to desperate behavior, as well as the tough social environment that forces people to harden their hearts even toward their closest kin: In China, drivers need pay only a small one-off fine if their victims die, whereas merely injuring them would incur lifelong compensation commitments. Bystanders are also afraid to help those in need because of *peng ci* (knocking at porcelain) —

scammers throwing themselves in front of vehicles to extort money — a practice so common it even features in the mainstream comedy “Devil Angel.”

The yarn begins with taxi driver Lao Shi ([Chen Gang](#)) sitting in his car observing a hit-and-run accident: Crowds gather to gawk, but no one tries to help. Flashback to three months earlier, when a drunken passenger grabbed his arm, causing his car to swerve and hit a motorcyclist. The injured man seems to be in critical condition, while police and ambulance take forever to arrive. Despite other pedestrians’ warnings that he’ll get in trouble for it, Shi drives the victim to the hospital himself. The patient, Li Jiang (Zhang Zebin), falls into a coma and Shi becomes liable for all his medical fees.

The police, the insurance firm, the taxi company and even drinking buddies upbraid him for not following procedures, even though none of them responded to his frantic calls at the time. Too scared to tell his wife, Mao Mao ([Nai An](#), the film’s exec producer), who’s enthusiastically planning to expand her home babysitting service to a proper nursery venue, Shi tries to do the right thing his own way. However, his attempts to borrow money from old friend “Captain” (Jia Zhangke’s male muse Wang Hongwei), or to beg his drunken passenger (Wang Shenglong) to record a police statement in his defense, end in cruel humiliation.

It’s the sign of a severe and collective moral crisis that no one appreciates Shi’s basic integrity in wanting to save a life; instead he’s blamed for dragging his family down. His lawyer says, without hesitation, that it would have been better if Li had just died; his wife’s actions to protect the family interests are cold-blooded in their pragmatism. “You never even said sorry!” she fumes, as if his compassion were a fault. Even the victim’s family appears more preoccupied with the financial consequences of the accident.

Like a figure out of classic neorealist cinema, Shi represents the working-class man who’s driven by compunction rather than some noble ideal. He’s incapable of groveling or calculating like his wife because of stubborn, old-fashioned male pride, and it’s no coincidence that his surname, Shi, means “stone.” (His nickname Lao Shi, meaning “Old Man Shi,” also puns with “honest” in Mandarin.) As Shi’s life spirals out of control, Chen makes the man’s inner turmoil compelling even in scenes in which he’s doesn’t utter a word.

At the midpoint, the film moves into murky psychological waters, as something snaps inside Shi and his intentions become increasingly sinister. Hong Kong-American lenser Leung Ming-kai eases the film’s unexpected transition into noir with eerie, darkly lit images of the city’s rural outskirts. Recurrent shots of leafy trees rustling in the wind ominously reference the tall grass grove in “Memories of Murder”; the forest and a marsh become potent symbols for the protag’s heart of darkness, in a macabre ending that provides an ironic example of divine justice.

The supporting actors all move and talk with documentary-like authenticity. Craft contributions from a mixed Canadian-mainland crew show no incongruity in style. Leung captures the buzz as well as grunge of Guangde, a third-tier mainland city in Anhui with deliberately harsh lighting and a smoky, dusty texture. Editors Mike Long and Daniel Garcia maintain superb tension, letting events unfold without hysterical drama.

<http://variety.com/2016/film/asia/old-stone-review-berlin-film-festival-1201708116/>