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Bing'ai at the 2008 Wisconsin Film Festival

Katya Szabados on Friday 04/04/2008 2:30 pm , (12) Recommendations

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Despite the rain, an enthusiastic crowd formed a long line outside the Bartell Theatre Thursday night for the sold-out Bing'ai.

The documentary, compiled by independent filmmaker Feng Yan over the course of ten years, follows Chinese peasant woman Zhang Bing Ai and her family through their struggles with power, poverty and government. Bing Ai's family lives along the Yangtze River in Hubei Province.

Their meager existence and hard life are threatened by the creation of the Three Gorges Dam project, which they're told will leave the family home submerged in water. The government seeks to relocate the villagers, but the Bing Ai's refuse to leave, railing against the injustice of abandoning their home and the fields that, while breaking their backs, allow them to eek out a living.

The film focuses on Zhang, creating an intimate portrait of her life; how she works tirelessly to provide for her family, how her marriage is more about convenience than love, and how her commitment to hard work and aversion to the city-dwellers' "dirty money" have guided her life's decisions.

It's an important movie to have made, with an important subject in both the dam project's impact on the local community and as a portrait of the frustrations caused when a group of simple people don't know how or who to fight when confronted with power.

That said, the movie's gritty filmmaking style and slow pace lessened the impact of the subject matter. Some of the conversations with Zhang, while proving much insight into her life, seem redundant and distracting from an important examination of the dam's impact. There's also no soundtrack throughout the film, leaving the audience to deal with the sounds of life: whining dogs, howling wind and boat horns.

In sum, a very realistic and timely film that could have done more to help the audience grasp the subject. The Bartell showing was the U.S. premiere and the film is presented in the Hubei dialect of Mandarin with English subtitles.

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