



GIORNATE  
DEGLI AUTORI  
VENICE DAYS

House on Fire & Mishka Productions  
*present*

UNDERGROUND  
FRAGRANCE

地下香

A Film by  
Pengfei



## Synopsis

YONG LE, a young migrant worker from the south, salvages furniture to re-sell. He lives in a room in Beijing's Underground City, a labyrinthian former bomb shelter that serves as cheap housing for people looking for opportunity in the big city. But after a bad work accident leaves him temporarily blind, he has to use a rope to find his way around the dimly lit basement halls, until the night meets a girl at the other end of his rope...

XIAO YUN, is a migrant too. She is desperately trying to find new employment so that she can leave her job pole dancing at nights. Her meeting with YONG LE and their burgeoning relationship encourages her to hunt for a more respectable job.

At ground level, Old JIN has been struggling for years to get a decent compensation deal from the authorities who want to demolish his house. His health is declining and his savings are evaporating. And he's counting on YONG LE to sell his furniture at a good price.

Three lives propelled by the "Chinese Dream" intermingle in the vast melting pot of the Beijing metropolis.



## Comment by Marie Pierre Duhamel Specialist in Chinese Cinema

Beijing has by now become a member of the hyper-modern metropolitan cities of the planet, and the images of its modernity are visible around the world: the speed with which towers and monuments get built every week, the high tech equipment involved and its spectacular highways are always astonishing. But it's a different world that Pengfei takes us to. This world has its basement, its lower structures, its people. The workers coming from other regions build the city and make it work, allow it to prosper and have fun. They all have the same dream: To climb the social ladder and to become inhabitants "like everybody else". For a young girl like Xiao Yun who makes a living by dancing in a bar, changing lifestyle would mean to work in an office. For the young Yongle it would be to send more money to his family. And for the Old Jins, in their Beijing house that is surrounded by bulldozers

and rubble, it would be to live in a luxury apartment by a lake...Dreams and hopes circulate between the surface and the underground, between high and low, while modern Beijing displays its neat facades, its managers with suits and ties. In front of Pengfei's calm and emphatic camera, underground and surface become metaphors of a society undergoing complete transformation. The grace of the film consists in knowing how to represent a whole world without ever forgetting the "movements of the heart", affection and desires, tenderness, anger, fear, shame, love...By multiplying these subtle details and tragicomic episodes where animals often play a surprising and almost fantastic role (owl, turtle, and cock put humans to the test), Pengfei imbues his story between "above" and "beneath" with the density of life, and the thickness of a reality that he has seen, experienced, felt and understood.



When watching *Underground Fragrance* you cannot but think of the masterpiece by a great filmmaker of the past, Zheng Juli: *Crows and Sparrows*. Set in Shanghai in 1949, the film tells the story of a world that is fueled by ambition and the dreams of a better life, by showing top to bottom a building in which there is a growing conflict between landlord and tenants. Two periods, but the same capacity to understand from within the feeling of a people, its illusions as well as its generosity, its contradictions and its capacity to survive. *Underground Fragrance* brilliantly joins the always fascinating group of films which know how to trace a modest but precise geography of the society of their time, without ever being theoretical or purely demonstrative. This diversity and finesse is clearly based on Pengfei's own personal experience and his attachment to Chinese culture. Without being

ostentatious but in a firm, calm and concentrated manner, with a sense of humor and timid elegance, this story will touch the audience and leave it with the feeling of having seen Beijing in a new light.



## Interview with Pengfei by Marie Pierre Duhamel

**The film seems to treat real estate operations, demolitions and re-locations, as a fundamental symptom of Chinese reality today? How did you approach this relation with today's reality?**

Demolitions, relocations and housing explosions imply a relation with the ground, the earth, the element that is maybe the most important for Chinese people. China is in "transition" and in the movement which the word implies, many have to build or rebuild their habitat. The film is nothing but a reflection of reality, and it is far from having all the toughness of it. This theme is also the form of expression that I have chosen: fireworks, climate, a troublesome owl, a turtle and the Beijing opera compose among other things a series of elements and details of a sentimental and Romanesque story-line: the aim being to describe how the behavior and feelings of these individuals develop in a context where everyone creates his own version of the "Chinese Dream".

**How did you find the locations for the shooting? Was the shooting difficult, given the history and the city's reality?**

The most difficult locations to find were the village that is just about to get demolished and the house of the Jin family. I wanted to shoot in a village

that is really getting demolished. But these operations were directed by the state. They have a specific calendar which cannot be influenced or stopped by a film-crew. Furthermore, the people in those villages are often suspicious of film-cameras. They are reluctant when it comes to being filmed. I was location-scouting in a village one day taking notes and pictures, but when I came back two weeks later the village had been completely destroyed, nothing was left of it. In the end we managed to find a village that matched what we needed, and thanks to the efforts of the production team, we were granted 15 days of shooting there. This village does not exist anymore. I think it's really our film that has taken and conserved the very last images of its existence.

**How did you get the idea for the film and how was it born?**

The first impulse to make the film came from the transformation that Beijing underwent while I wasn't living there for a couple of years. I grew up with my grandfather from my mother's side. Later, I went to France for my studies, for 7 years. When I came back to my grandfather's, I couldn't recognize anything anymore. The speed with which Beijing had changed was shocking for me. At that time I wanted to write a story that would picture the changes



the city had undergone. I went to the underground-lodgings for the first time after a meeting with some fellow-artists that had moved to Beijing who had invited me to their place: by some lucky coincidence, this was right next to my grand-parent's place. But I could have never imagined that an entirely different world existed in an environment that was so familiar to me, an underground world: with dark, hidden stairways, tight corridors, and very heavy, humid air conditions: In brief, like the *house with 72 tenants* from the film by Chu Yuan (Hong Kong, 1973). Beneath the feet of the flourishing, modern capital was a different space, and I found that very exciting. People who move to Beijing from other regions often have a nick-name with a tragic connotation: Beipiao, the "Beijing drifters".

"Demolition and relocation" is a widespread expression nowadays. It also means that "relocated" people can become rich overnight. You often hear the story of the "Audi Village". After the destruction of a village, its people all went to buy Audi cars, and you could see them circulate in all directions in the area. When a real estate agent wanted to buy the house of my family, the price he offered for evacuating the place was not bad, but my dad wanted to get more, and the negotiation didn't come to an end. Furthermore, he spent the whole day thinking about the life he would have as a rich man, but these high hopes and expectations ended up consuming his energy.

Prayers to the gods of fortune, an owl being shot at, the organization of a banquet, the selling of an excavator... all these dramatic moments really happened at the time and they evoke what Akira Kurosawa calls the "toad's oil" in his autobiographic book - this precious oil which a toad produces when it is placed in front of a mirror and discovers its reflection, and with which the filmmaker creates a metaphor about his regrets in life.

I've written and described the surface and the underground, the demolition and the flow of drifters, like a cross-structure that represents the people and the things of Beijing.

### Have certain filmmakers been an inspiration for you?

The filmmaker who had the most profound influence on me is Tsai Ming-Liang. I had the occasion to work with him for several years. His perfectionism, his rigor and precision in the conception of the characters have always fascinated me and left a mark on me.

When I was writing the scenes between Xiao Yun and Yongle, I often thought of the ways in which Tsai Ming-Liang knows how to describe the delicacy of



relationships between the inhabitants of a big city.

The Palestinian filmmaker Elia Suleiman is also a director that I like a lot, and I found his film *Divine Intervention* very impressive. He also describes a village and the problems of different families there with an absurd sense of humor. When I was writing the episodes of Old Jin and those of the inhabitants in the underground, I was often thinking about his choices in direction.

### How did you choose the actors who embody the different characters in the story?

My own family has experienced a "demolition and relocation", and I thus had some examples in mind for the roles of Old Jin and his wife (the stubborn couple). Those examples helped me look for my actors. The actor Zhao Fuyu who plays Old Jin is the perfect embodiment of an era. He knows how to be fiery and indignant, but the way he looks expresses painful resignation at the same time. The almost heroic spirit of his youth has practically vanished when it comes to facing today's reality. The first time we met, he sang for me with a lot of passion a song for kids from the early sixties, *My country is in Black Africa*, which made me really understand that he experienced that era and

that he was close to the character of Old Jin.

The actress that plays old Jin's wife is my mother! She has experienced herself the troubles of "relocation", which allows her to give her interpretation of the character a very special dimension. Regarding the choice of two youngsters in the underground, my starting point was a desire to have some contrast between people in the underground-world. I discovered that the young boys and girls "down there" try to come across as "hip" and very "modern": when you see them "up there" you would never imagine the toughness of the environment they live in. The actress which plays Yun, Ying Ze, perfectly expresses that concept, this contrast between appearance and reality. More importantly, she has a temper that is both proud and reserved, with a look that is very soft, and she perfectly translates the contradictory aspects of solitude in this overcrowded space. She is determined to move upwards socially, no matter the cost. She meets a boy that she admires and likes him but she doesn't forget her ambitions, and in the end he can only accept the decisions of fate and move on. That's Xiao Yun.

It's from a similar point of view that I have chosen Luo Wenjie for the role of Yongle. He is physically different, and embodies quite well the tristesse of life in the underground. I later came to think that Yongle shares certain features with me: he's taciturn, but a good boy, he does not complain and is rather



patient. In this sense, Luo Wenjie's character and mine resemble each other a lot. Blindfolded, Yongle, after having become vulnerable, eventually resigns in front of adversity with a philosophical attitude.

**Watching the film lovers of Chinese cinema will be reminded of Zheng Junli's masterpiece *Crows and Sparrows* (1949) where society at the time gets reflected in the life of a building in Shanghai, where the tenants in the underground-floors are about to get thrown out...**

That's right. Albeit in a different period and in a different historical context, it's the same question that the two films deal with: the house, home. The society in which *Crows and Sparrows* is set is struggling with war, and the point of view of the film is quite direct: the tenants of the speculating landlord can only unite to resist against the bad forces. A fight of the same type is taking place in *Underground Fragrance* today, but it's a battle of everyone against everybody, which is true of Old Jin, owner of his house, as much as for the "tenants" Yongle and Xiao Yun: everyone tries to reach their goals.

In order to find out about how to reach that goal and which road you should take, do you have to compromise or refuse the calls of fate?

**Why have you chosen an end that may seem full of melancholy if not pessimistic?**

I think I got the inspiration through the life of those that are around me, the end of a film emerges from those impressions and feelings. I've always had very negative and pessimistic feelings, regarding those events that are linked to "demolition and relocation". And I know that greed only makes things worse. Maybe after a couple of days following a first proposition, the manager in charge will call you and say: "We will talk about your village in 6 months, and maybe we will be less rigid then." And maybe everything works out fine, but looking back, you measure everything that has been lost. In those underground-lodgings, a reality that is so tough, very few think of staying where they are for love's sake. Xiao Yun really loves Yongle, she has thought of calling him again, but she also thinks about her personal goals, and she won't stop for Yongle.

I have had the opportunity to interview a boy who lived in that kind of underground-lodging. His job was fixing household air conditioners. He told me: "My friends that have come to work downtown with me have all gone, each in a different direction. Some have had some success, but me, I find myself quite alone here. I'm kind of fed up with it and I feel like going back home."

**It seems that among the characters of the film, women seem to have more strength and resilience than men...**

In order to discuss this "strength" of women, we have to ask ourselves if, and how, women have overcome the system of patriarchy. The female characters of Chinese cinema, maybe in contrast to those you get to see in Western cinema, find themselves confronted with a tragic fate, and the screenplays often like to describe the weak women of the patriarchal system. Many films describe the subordination of women and how they fight to get out of it.

Songlian's character which is interpreted by Gong Li in *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) by Zhang Yimou, is a wife that is uncompromising at first but who then becomes a weak traditional woman that capitulates in front of her "master" and thus moves on to her tragic ending. Zhang Yimou had already told the story of another woman, Judou (*Ju Dou*, 1990), in search of liberty and who obtains her personal liberation by sheer will power. Even if her struggle comes at the cost of her son killing his own father, I find this very powerful: she maneuvers inside of the patriarchal system and looks for the breach through which she can escape. At the time, transgressing the limits of the patriarchal system was hardly possible...

Coming back to my film, Xiao Yun does everything she can in order to break free from the "pole dance" and the night club: this can be seen as a desire to escape from the "macho" perspective and the supremacy of the male point of view. She interrupts her efforts for Yongle, but after having been wounded and humiliated, she goes back to follow her path.

By contrast, Old Jin's wife is a strong woman, who makes plans to help her husband, and I think she secretly hopes that if the relocation deal comes to an end, she will have an opportunity to claim her liberty. But where she is right now, it's her husband and the real estate agent that determine her fate.

Maybe I can summarize things this way: Xiao Yun is today's force fighting patriarchy, whereas Old Jin's wife has the resilience of women that live within patriarchy.

Patriarchy slowly moved towards its own destruction. And as Michel Foucault said: "It's not important in which era a story takes place, but the era in which it is told."





## Pengfei

Pengfei was born in a family linked to the Beijing opera scene. His grandfather and his mother both worked in this field: it had a profound influence on him as a consequence and it made him acquire an undeniable attachment to traditional Chinese art and culture. After his diploma in film direction at the "Institut International de l'Image et du Son" in France, he began working from 2008 onwards as assistant director for the Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang. He was assistant director on the film *Face (Visage)*. "*Underground Fragrance*" is his first feature film. It received development support from Cinémarc Rotterdam, the Torino Filmalb, the Cinereach Award of Sundance Writer Lab and the Cinéfondation of the Cannes Film Festival.

- 2005 *Ideal and reality* – short-film
- 2007 *Luxury article* – short-film
- 2008 Assistant Director for Tsai Ming-liang for the film *Face (Visage)*.
- 2011 Beginning of writing *Underground Fragrance*
- 2012 First assistant director for *Walker* by Tsai Ming-liang (collection *Beautiful Hong Kong 2012*)
- 2013 Co-author and 1st assistant director for the film *Stray Dogs* by Tsai Ming-liang



## Ying Ze (Xiao Yun)

Co Producer

Actress and co-producer of the film, Ying Ze has a diploma from the London School of Economics and the first prize of the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art. Back in China, she created the company Mishka Production (Yong'an) always working as an actress in parallel. *Underground Fragrance* is the first time that she has a first role in a feature film.



## Luo Wenjie (Yongle)

Actor and top-model, under contract with Longteng Models, he has walked the catwalk and worked for several international luxury brands. *Underground Fragrance* is his screen debut.



**Zhao Fuyu (Old Jin)**

Actor attached to the First August Studios, member of the Association of Chinese Filmmakers, member of the Chinese Academy of Dramatic arts. Winner of the best actor award for the film "Xiao Bai Hua" (Changchun Studios) and for his role in the tv-film *Re Xue*.



**Li Xiaohui (Old Jin's wife)**

Artist at the Beijing Opera and actress for more than 40 years, artist at the opera crew "pingju" of Haidian (Beijing).



## Shu Chou

### Photography

Famous Chinese director of photography, notably attached to the company Partos (United States). After his studies at the Fine Arts department of the University of Tunghai in Taiwan, he studied in Germany at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne, and at the Academy of arts in Berlin and Barcelona, before graduating at London Film School. He speaks English, German, and Spanish, and has lived for more than 12 years in Europe, working as a director of photography in Taipei, London, Barcelona and Berlin. In 2012, he received a Golden Horse award for Best Photography for his work on *The Piano in a Factory* by Zhang Meng.



## Isabelle Mayor

### Screenplay and Editing

Born in Switzerland and living in Paris, Isabelle has written, directed and edited various films. Her short-film *Betty's menagerie* (*La ménagerie de Betty*) was selected at the Locarno Festival in 2010. The next year she was awarded the Bourse Beaumarchais SACD for screenplay. In 2015 she was invited to participate in the South Africa Factory of the Director's Fortnight in Cannes where she was selected to direct a short-film next to 7 other filmmakers.



## Jean-Christophe Onno

### Original Music

Self-taught musician, multi-instrumentalist, Jean-Christophe Onno has a rich and passionate background and career. After several experiences in rock groups as an adolescent, he turned to cinema for 10 years, first as a camera operator, then as 1st assistant director. He took classes in electro-acoustic music at the Conservatory of Marseille in parallel. In 2003, he became David Walter's bass player. In 2008 he founded the collective *Yes or No* with the singer Lembe Loka. He composed for numerous young filmmakers like Brahim Fritah, Pascal Tessaud, Michel-Ange Quay or Eva Pervolovici. In 2013 he received several awards for the music of *Chronique d'une cour de récré* (Playground Chronicles) by Brahim Fritah.

## Tu Duu-Chih

### Sound design

Born in 1955 in Taiwan, He made his debut working on the film *Winter 1905* by Yu Wai-ching in 1981. Having become director of sound in 1982, he worked on the collective film *In Our Time* and continued his career with filmmakers of New Taiwanese Cinema. A key collaborator for filmmakers Hou Hsiao Hsien, Edward Yang, Wong Kar-Wai and Tsai Ming Liang, he gets recognized at the 2001 Cannes Festival for his work on *What is it there?* and *Millenium Mambo*. In 2004, he received the Taiwan National Arts Grand Prix. He has been awarded 10 times with the Taiwan Golden Horse, notably for *Monga* in 2000, in 2011 for *Sēdiq Bale* and in 2013 for *Soul*. He was also sound designer for the film *The Assassin* by Hou Hsiao-hsien that won the "Best Director" award at the Cannes Festival in 2015.



## Vincent Wang

Producer

A Frenchman with Taiwanese origins, Vincent Wang worked in France as line-producer before meeting the Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang in 1999. This encounter prompted Wang's return to his home country, where he founded the Homegreen films company with Tsai Ming-liang and Lee Kang Sheng. Wang produced *What time is it there?*, *The Wayward cloud* and *Stray Dogs* by Tsai Ming-Liang, along with other distinguished films by other directors. His roots and production experience in both Europe and Asia made him a point of reference for Chinese co-productions in Europe. In 2009 he founded the production company House on Fire and in 2012 he became the director of the art-house theatre "Les Trois Luxembourg" which aims to promote established directors from all over the world as well as younger filmmakers.

## House on Fire (France)

House on Fire is a production company that was founded in 2009 and which aims to work closely with renowned directors on their new films as well as supporting innovative and courageous projects from emerging filmmakers.

Filmography No Exhaustive

2015 *Peace us to our dream* by Sharunas Bartas  
Directors Fortnight Section, Cannes 2015

2015 *Portrait of The Artist* (Le Dos Rouge) by Antoine Barraud  
Forum Section, Berlinale 2015

2014 *Journey to the West* (Xi You) by Tsai Ming Liang  
Special Panorama Section, Berlinale 2014

2013 *Stray Dogs* (Jiao You) by Tsai Ming Liang  
Grand Jury Price, Mostra of Venice 2013

2012 *Age is...* by Stephen Dwoskin  
Out of Competition, Locarno 2012

## Mishka Production (China)

The company Mishka (Tianjin, China) was created in 2014 by a group of young film professionals. The international background of the founders, with experiences both in China and Europe or the United States, is the basis of the originality of their approach and grants them an exceptional open-mindedness in discovering and producing talents that are capable of attracting a large audience in all countries. The company thus wants to contribute with new blood to the dynamics of the international film circuit.



## Production Information

Year of Production: 2015  
Countries of Production: France / China  
Running Time: 75 minutes  
Original Version: Chinese  
Digital 2K, 1:1.85

## The Crew

Main actors: Ying Ze, Luo Wenjie, Zhao Fuyu,  
Li Xiaohui  
Director: Pengfei  
Screenplay: Pengfei, Isabelle Mayor  
Director of Photography: Shu Chou  
Art Director: Wang Chaohui  
Costumes Design: Wang Jiahui  
Editing: Isabelle Mayor  
Sound Designer : Tu Duu-chih, Tu Yi-ching  
Sound Recorder: Li Minna  
Music Composer: Jean-Christophe Onno  
DI Colorist : Yov Moor  
Producers : Vincent Wang, Ying Ze

## With Participation of

Aide aux Cinémas du monde  
Centre National Du Cinéma et de l'Image  
Animée  
Ministère des Affaires Etrangères et du  
Développement International  
Institut Français

## With Support of

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## World Sales

UDI - Urban Distribution Int.

## Translation

French Translation: Marie Pierre Duhamel  
Chinese Translation: Zhao Jianing  
English Translation: Philippe Dijon  
Italian Translation: Valentina Gonzo  
  
Graphic Design : Winder Chen  
The Calligraphy : Zhu Quan



HOUSE ON FIRE



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Asian Project Market



## Press Contact

Gary Delépine

42 Rue René Boulanger  
75010 Paris, France  
Cellphone: +33 6 88 12 73 85  
E-mail: gary@houseonfire.fr

## World Sales



### Urban Distribution Int

Venice Delphyne Besse +33 6 72 72 91 93  
Toronto Delphyne Besse +33 6 72 72 91 93

Paris Office: 14 rue du 18 août  
93100 Montreuil France  
Tel: +33 1 48 70 46 56  
Email: sales@urbandistrib.com  
www.urbandistrib.com  
Webtv: urbandistrib.tv



### House on Fire (France)

Vincent Wang

42 Rue René Boulanger  
75010 Paris, France  
Tel: +33 9 84 11 40 92  
E-mail: info@houseonfire.fr  
www.houseonfire.fr



### Mishka Productions (China)

Adresse: Rm.1606,16/F, Bonham  
Trade Centre, 50 Bonham Strand,  
Sheung Wan, HK  
Tel: +852 28277272  
Fax: +852 28270608  
E-Mail: 18810119082@163.com