What a film about a poor Gansu farmer says of China's quest for soft power

Return To Dust fell foul of censors ahead of the party congress despite popularity at home and critical acclaim abroad.

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BEIJING - Ma Youtie is a dirt-poor farmer living in China's Gansu province.

When viewers first meet him, he lives in a shed owned by his brother, owns little more than an old donkey, and is looked down upon for being the poorest in his village. His family pushes him into a union with a disabled woman, Cao Guiying, who is a fellow outcast in the village. To their families it is a marriage of convenience, so that they can be rid of their respective burdens.

The Chinese film Return To Dust tells the story of how Ma and Cao grow to love each other as they build their own home and eke out a living. The arthouse movie – nominated for best film at the Berlin International Film Festival, where it premiered in February – was also an unexpected hit in China after it opened in cinemas in the country in July.

At a time when patriotic blockbusters dominate the box office, it was at one point the top-rated domestic movie on Chinese film review site Douban this year, with fans lauding the film for its realistic portrayal of rural life.

But art came crashing against politics when the film was pulled from cinemas and online streaming platforms in the run-up to the October party congress. There has been no official explanation, but it is likely that officials feared it might be construed as criticism of Chinese President Xi Jinping's anti-poverty drive. If the campaign has been successful, then how does one explain the positive reception to a film about a farmer's hardscrabble life?

Mr Xi, who at the congress had lauded the party's achievements in eradicating abject poverty, had at the same meeting issued a call for greater cultural confidence, saying that China must develop artists and writers that can better present the country to the world.

He envisions China as a modern great power, confident in its culture and history, but the censorship of this popular arthouse flick suggests deep insecurities as China marches towards superpower status.

Rural spotlight

Return To Dust might be a work of fiction, but the struggles of Ma and Cao are a reality for millions of poor peasants in China. Like many, the couple found themselves forced out of their modest family home because it stood on land taken over by property developers.

There is a scene in the film where Ma, who has lived all his life in a mud-brick house, is led to a high-rise apartment by a TV crew. The apartment was built for him by the government, and the crew want to know how he feels about moving there. Looking lost in the gleaming apartment, Ma responds: "People can live here, but where do my donkey, my pigs and hens live?"

Return To Dust's director, Li Ruijun, who grew up in a village in Gansu, said his goal was to spotlight the plight of China's rural farmers.

"There are nearly 500 million farmers in our country and nearly 80,000 cinema screens, but on these screens there are very few movies about the lives of ordinary rural people," said Li in an August interview with the China Writers' Association.

The movie is gritty in its realism; Li made the cast live in the village for a year. The protagonist Ma was played by Wu Renlin, who is Li's uncle and an actual farmer.

Political statement

Li declined a request for an interview, citing sensitivities over discussing the film. It is not difficult to see why Return To Dust fell foul of the censors.

Under Mr Xi, the government has uprooted farmers and relocated them to urban dwellings, providing jobs and education for their families in a massive campaign that has lifted millions out of poverty. But as the film shows, it can also be a dislocating experience for peasants who are powerless against the state.

The film's detractors say the movie should not have been allowed to run in China in the first place, and that it makes China look bad in front of an international audience.

Mr Zheng Yanshi, a Chinese academic, accused Li of being a traitor in an article on WeChat that has been read more than 100,000 times. "It's not that there is no poverty and backwardness in rural China, but what you have meticulously fabricated is not China, but a China that has been extremely smeared in order to win Western awards," he said.

Media scholars say the film was likely taken down following these complaints, with officials assessing that it contradicted official narratives on poverty eradication.

"A major characteristic of the Xi era is what he calls constant 'struggles', 斗争, which means there are always enemies... Top leaders would suspect that any criticism is from these enemies who want to curb and sabotage China's development," journalism professor Fang Kecheng at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, who studies media and politics, told The Straits Times.

Party control

Under Mr Xi, space for all types of creative expression has been narrowing, as the party exerts greater control over culture, and movies have been no exception. Said Prof Fang: "Compared with previous administrations, the current one emphasises the unification of opinions at an even higher level."

A top policy document issued by the China Film Administration in March called the movie industry "an important battlefield for ideological and propaganda work", one that reflects the growth of China's soft power.

Calling for greater cultural confidence, Mr Xi said during the party congress: "Ideological work is about forging the character of a country and the soul of a nation. We must ensure that the party firmly exercises leadership over this work."

Critically acclaimed films such as Ju Dou and Raise The Red Lantern by Chinese director Zhang Yimou that dealt with sensitive themes and raised censors' hackles when they were released in the 1990s would not make it to cinema screens today, said observers. They see the Chinese film industry gradually moving towards movies of the Mao era, with recent nationalistic blockbusters such as the Wolf Warrior action movies, or patriotic films like My People, My Homeland, emphasising themes of heroism or featuring self-sacrificing officials or party members.

"Now, like back then, you are starting to have movies that have protagonists who are what people call 'gao da quan' (tall, big and perfect in Chinese). He will be tall, handsome and have no flaws or selfish thoughts. In party-speak, such a character exists to serve the people wholeheartedly," said a Beijing-based media scholar who spoke on condition of anonymity.

Confidence or insecurity

The idea, as Mr Xi's newly appointed propaganda chief Li Shulei said in the People's Daily last Thursday, is that artistic expression must "serve the people and socialism".

It is part and parcel of building cultural confidence, which Mr Li called the "the most basic, deepest and longest-lasting strength in a country's and its people's development", and a must for building the sort of spiritual strength that China needed to "stand tall among nations in the world".

Cultural confidence is an amorphous sounding concept but, roughly, it means taking pride in the oft-cited 5,000 years of Chinese civilisation and the Communist Party's role as the inheritor and steward of that legacy.

It is one of China's "four confidences" doctrine, which aims to build up faith in the country's path, ideology, system and culture.

Movies are a tool in this effort to spread "zhengnengliang" or positive energy – booster shots of faith in the party's leadership that have become all the more important considering challenges such as Covid-19, said Dr Wei Wuhui, who specialises in media studies at the Shanghai Jiaotong University. "In the past two years or so, these efforts have been stepped up, to foster a kind of national cohesion or consciousness," said Dr Wei.

One form that it takes is a hyper-vigilant sense of nationalism that gets triggered whenever there is a perceived slight against China. Foreign businesses such as Nike and H&M, which have been hit by consumer boycotts, know only too well the risks of setting off nationalist outrage.

But as the debate over Return To Dust shows, the power to push back is also a hollow, brittle sort of confidence, one that papers over deep insecurities about China's shortcomings and how it is perceived by the outside world.

"As we say in China, if we are truly confident then there is no need to keep mentioning the need to build up confidence," said the Beijing-based media scholar who requested anonymity.

Indeed, for all the talk of being self-confident, Beijing seems rather fixated on external awards and validation.

Prof Fang, in a study published earlier this year, pointed out that Chinese state media regularly quoted foreign experts in order to cultivate an image for "domestic audiences that (Beijing's) policies hold global support".

He traces this behaviour to the trauma of China's "century of humiliation" at the hands of foreign powers when China under the Qing Dynasty was weak and backward. Beijing has since benchmarked itself against foreign powers. "China's rise is measured by how it got ahead of Japan and how it may surpass the US in the future," he said.

It is ironic that while China has now surpassed many of its rivals economically and in other sectors, its sense of self-confidence is fragile enough to be bruised by a tale of two poor villagers.

Beijing should, perhaps, consider taking a leaf from the United States and South Korea in its quest for global soft power. Both nations have celebrated films such as Nomadland (incidentally by Chinese director Chloe Zhao and about homelessness in America), and Parasite, which depicts social inequality in South Korea.

Movies hold up a mirror to our societies. To be sure, there is America's Top Gun to match the Wolf Warrior movies, but the likes of Nomadland and Parasite do not flinch from showing the imperfections in American and South Korean societies, respectively.

From the international reception to the two films, both countries have not suffered a soft power deficit for being brutally honest about the presence of warts. Quite the contrary.