



A Song Sung Blue

(XIAO BAI CHUAN)

a film by GENG Zihan

China - 2023 - 92 min - 1:1.85 - 5.1 - Mandarin / Korean

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WOLF Consultants

Gordon Spragg, Laurin Dietrich, Michael Arnon

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LOG LINE During the loneliest of summers, shy, 15 year old Xian meets extroverted Mingmei, an 18 year old Chinese-Korean girl and an enchantment begins...

SYNOPSIS : Xian will always remember the loneliest and bluest of summers when she was 15. After her mother has to go abroad for work, Xian is thrown into the care of her father, a free-spirited photographer, who she has barely seen since her parents divorce. He's struggling financially and is fooling around with his assistant who has an 18-year-old daughter, Mingmei. Soon, Mingmei appears like a ray of shining light to Xian. During this restless summer, the conflict between the innocence and the impulses of youth will leave an indelible mark on Liu...

INTERVIEW WITH DIRECTOR GENG ZIHAN

The film delves into a world of the transitory youth of two girls. Why did you want to explore this particular theme?

Youth is a fragile state that often slips away and is taken for granted before we even realize it. However, as we age, we may still catch glimpses of our youthful selves shining through. In some way, youth holds quite a significance in shaping who we become as adults. The allure of youth lies in the very fact that we only realize its value in hindsight. In the story, the two girls struggle to come to terms with their conflicting desires for maturity and the nostalgia of their childhood innocence. It creates a sense of unease as they attempt to find their place in the world.

As a young person, I too have longed to hold onto the feeling of youth. In my teenage years, I mistook intense emotions of love for the essence of being young. It was not until I matured did I realize I was only in love with the sensation of being reckless, and I was needlessly embracing pain for the sake of being cool. But I was unaware as a teen. I floundered aimlessly, like a headless chicken. It may seem foolish, but it was the beautiful and precious aspects of youth.

The film features two protagonists with contrasting personalities. What did you want to say by putting these two very different people in juxtaposition?

Mingmei's radiance attracts Liu Xian, particularly during her moments of loneliness when Mingmei brings a refreshing sense of excitement. In turn, Liu Xian's innocence allows Mingmei to unload her burdens and feel the warmth and love of a true friend. Despite their different stages in life - with Mingmei navigating the social landscape while Liu Xian is still in school - it is Liu Xian who provides Ming Mei with unwavering support and tenderness. As someone who has experienced the profound love and care from female friends, I would describe the feeling as being embraced like an infant in a mother's arms. Liu Xian herself likely never imagined that she would display such motherly instincts as she embarked on this journey.

To me, this instinctive nurturing quality is not bound by age, but rather flows out naturally at certain moments. Just like Liu Xian's presence alone, with the rise and fall of her chest as she breathes, brings Mingmei a sense of relaxation and ease.

Our director of photography, Hao Jiayue, and I also aimed to capture the subtle nuances of their inner worlds through the camera, particularly using flowing lights to depict the fluidity of their emotions. When dealing with emotionally charged scenes, we simulate the lights of passing cars with moving lights. These starry lights delicately sprinkle on their skin, creating a sensation akin to the tender touch of warm hands or the comfort of mutual solace.

As the story begins, Liu Xian is presented with men's clothing from the choir, an intriguing development. Why do you want to orchestrate such a plot point?

Liu Xian is a resilient girl who is withdrawn yet brave. Wearing men's clothes is not a conscious decision for her, but a compelling impulse of a teen. The impulse has always been there with her, even in her interactions with Mingmei. This plot also hints towards her gender inclination as she approaches the end of her adolescence. She is like a blank canvas waiting to be painted with her own colors. Everything remains unknown but full of possibilities.

Liu Xian's reaction to seeing Mingmei's portrait photo for the first time is a special moment in the story. As an audience, we can feel the intensity of Liu Xian's emotions. As the director, how do you interpret this moment?

Liu Xian is forced to feign maturity due to her mother's absence during the summer, and the presence of her unfamiliar father only adds to the challenge of opening up to him. Mingmei's portrait photo illuminates her lonely heart like a ray of light.

The appearance of the vibrant Mingmei in Liu Xian's otherwise dull life sparks an eagerness to explore and comprehend the outside world. Amidst the summer of youth, a blend of a confusing relationship, an influx of desire, hesitation and temptation flourish recklessly, drawing Liu Xian in with the allure of novelty.

What is your interpretation of Liu Xian's feelings for Mingmei?

Liu Xian's unique affection for Mingmei is precisely because of the uncertainty of her youth. This makes her confused but also fascinated by it. But this feeling is the most sincere, immersed in it without reservation at the simplest of ages. That summer, Liu Xian had nothing but Mingmei in her eyes.

The meaning of the song "Little White Boat" ("Xiao Bai Chuan") and the creation of the Chinese and English titles

The Chinese title, *Xiao Bai Chuan* (*Little White Boat*), comes from a nursery rhyme widely sung in China. Just like the choir performance that Liu Xian takes part in, this is a song we all sang when we were young. The song is originally a Korean nursery rhyme. The Korean version is called *Half Moon* and it's usually used in Korea to bid farewell, express a longing for family or your hometown, or to commemorate the passing of a loved one.

During the summer, Liu Xian sang *Little White Boat* for Mingmei on stage, but that was when she was most vulnerable. She didn't want to show this to anyone, let alone admit that she was going through a particularly rough time. She quietly disappeared without saying goodbye to Liu Xian. By winter, Mingmei had a new lease of life, and she was full of expectations for her upcoming Korean life. The Korean version of *Half Moon* at the wedding was Mingmei's belated farewell to Liu Xian, and also a farewell to her homeland. The unexpected but familiar melody makes Liu Xian's eyes fill with uncontrollable tears. The memories come rushing back, but she knew she ~~she~~ could never return to that summer.

Everything about Liu Xian's former life changes with the end of this summer. She has grown rapidly through this period. Growing up is painful, and "Little White Boat" is a song sung blue for everyone's growth. *A Song Sung Blue* also became the English title of *Xiao Bai Chuan*.

How did you find your actors? What was the casting process?

The actor Zhou Meijun, who played Liu Xian, was selected as the best candidate for the role when *A Song Sung Blue* participated in the CFDG Young Directors Support Program. I recognized Zhou Meijun's natural yet extremely tense performance in *Angels Wear White*, directed by Wen Yan. The emotion of the protagonist Liu Xian runs through the story of *A Song Sung Blue* and is the pivot of every shot in the film. The actor Zhou Meijun always exuded the most authentic charm in front of the camera, and she is seemingly never 'acting' throughout her precise performance.

Huang Ziqi, who plays Mingmei, is my college friend. We have collaborated on many projects since we were students. We are very familiar with each other and have a certain unspoken understanding. Jin Mingmei is a complex and multifaceted character. Huang Ziqi showed the layers of Mingmei's sophisticated, authentic exterior, and also her soft and fragile heart in front of the camera. During the performance, she personally experienced Mingmei's sadness and joy, and the heartbreak behind Mingmei's line "I'm just unlucky". In that moment, she became Jin Mingmei.

Liang Long who plays Liu Xian's father is the lead singer of the band Second Hand Rose. He is avant-garde, bold and unruly on stage. The role of Liu Xian's father is like another "Liang Long", but one who takes pictures instead of playing rock 'n roll. Both have a humorous and relaxed approach to life, and they have many things in common. The actor Liang Long's performance endows Liu Xian's father with a deeper side. That is to say, behind the face of humor, there is a deep concern for others, and he gives just the right care and attention to his daughter Liu Xian when she needs it most.

The father's photo studio plays a very important role as the central location of the film. How did you conceive this location and the role of the father?

This story is set ten years ago, when cameras on mobile phones were not really developed yet. It was the last period of prosperity for the photo studio industry. The photo studio is a rich tapestry full of stories, containing a lot of childhood memories of our generation. But photo studios are gradually disappearing from our field of vision, and the place where memories were preserved is now becoming the memory of the times itself.

Liu Xian's father is an interesting person, and photography is his hobby. Although he didn't do so well in life, his seemingly old-fashioned life experience enabled him to get along with all kinds of customers who come through the photo studio. Liu Xian's father gave Liu Xian a different education during their summer together, allowing Liu Xian to learn to accept reality, and also learn to let go. The photo studio is a microcosm of the adult world, and it opens a window to the colorful world for Liu Xian.

Can you share with us the story behind the creation of *A Song Sung Blue*?

The script is the graduation project of our screenwriter Liu Yining, who happened to be my college roommate. During our college years, we were close and supported each other's growth. The story is set in her hometown, and thus many elements and details are based on her

experiences there. The script consultant Gu Zheng, also our professor from the Central Academy of Drama, helped us a great deal to perfect the script throughout the process. As graduation approached, we made the decision to apply for the CFDG Young Director Support Program with this script. Luckily, we met Liang Jing through the program, who became the producer of this film. The film was then brought to life in the following summer.

During pre-production, a team of talented filmmakers, mostly females, joined the project, including producer Jane Zheng, director of photography Hao Jiayue, production designer Du Luxi, wardrobe and makeup designer Ma Xing and others. It was a fascinating experience, with all kinds of gentle voices and tenderness going on among the crew on set, which ultimately imbued the film with a unique emotional depth and an extra layer of richness.

In post-production, the project welcomed more male, diversified perspectives, with international creators like editor Matthew Laclau, sound designer Zhang Yang, colorist Yov Moor, and composer Hank Lee coming on board. They brought with them new voices and different cultures to the Chinese nature of this film. Working alongside our female editor Cai Yanshan online for the past two years made me realize that the core of this creation all came from our shared understanding of youth, transcending gender, nationality, age and career seniority. We all relate ourselves with Liu Xian's experience in that very summer.

It is my heartfelt aspiration that every audience can cry and laugh with Liu Xian, reliving their memories of youth through *A Song Sung Blue*.

DIRECTOR'S BIOGRAPHY

Geng Zihan was born in Beijing in 1996 and graduated from the Central Academy of Drama. Her short film *A Ray of Sunshine* was selected in competition at the 13th First International Film Festival and nominated for Best Short Story. Her short film *Green Screen* was selected by the 25th LA Shorts International Film Festival. Her current debut feature film, *A Song Sung Blue*, was selected as one of the Top Five of the 5th CFG Young Directors Support Program.

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

A Song Sung Blue (2023) 92min (Cannes Directors' Fortnight)
Green Screen (2021) (27' – The 25th LA Shorts International Film Festival) short
A Ray of Sunshine (2019) (26' – The 13th First International Film Festival) short

CAST

LIU Xian / ZHOU Meijun (China)
JIN Mingmei / HUANG Ziqi (China)
LIU's Mother/ LIANG Jing
LIU's Father/ LIANG Long

CREW

Director: GENG Zihan
Screenplay : LIU Yining
Creative Executive: GU Zheng
Direction of photography : HAO Jiayue
Art Director : DU Luxi
Costume Designer : Ma Xing
Editor : Matthieu LACLAU/ TSAI Yann-Shan
Sound Designer : Zhang Yang
Original Music : Hank LEE
Colorist: Yov Moor

Executive Producer: LIANG Jing
Producer: Jane Zheng
Co-Prodcer: Justin O.