

Mpls./St. Paul International Film Festival: "The Shaft"

76

By [JBunce](#)

"The Shaft"

Obviously, one of the appeals of foreign language film is its ability to show us the ways in which life is lived in other parts of the world in ways far different from our own. But there is also the other side: the way it can often show us the many common things that link us to people in other lands, the similarity of feelings and attitudes, and the general philosophy that was expressed in the title of the old "Twilight Zone" episode, "People Are Alike All Over". The latter is the chief appeal of the final film review from this year's Minneapolis/St. Paul International Film Festival, "The Shaft".

"The Shaft" is the story of a family... or, more properly, the three individual stories of each of its members. They live in a small rural town whose livelihood depends almost totally on the mine which nearly all citizens work for. Father is retired from the mine and attempting to find the whereabouts of the wife he can't forget who left him over 20 years earlier. Daughter, though not a miner, currently works in the mine in a different capacity and is attempting to find a job that will allow her to move to Beijing. And son is a student with not much of a future outside of the mine, though he dreams of making use of his singing talent and becoming a pop star.

Obviously, there's nothing about disfunctional families that limits stories about them to any particular part of the world, as "The Shaft" clearly illustrates. The family always makes times for meals with all family members present, but it's not uncommon for the entire meal to pass without a word being spoken... nobody has anything they want to communicate to anyone else. Father is still concerned enough about his children that he wants to spare them a life in the mine of the kind he had, but can't make them understand his concerns, their being too busy with their own problems. It's a classic nuclear family... but it's also three individuals sharing the same space but not the same lives, and an absent mother who abandoned them all decades ago. Any of this can and does happen in virtually every nation, and while there are some uniquely Chinese touches in this film, you mostly come away with an understanding of the universality of this family predicament.

There are certainly communities in the U.S. (and elsewhere) where one industry dominates the town to the extent that multiple generations of the same family have worked in it and don't see any future for themselves outside of it. (Not that I'm trying to draw any similarities here between the town I lived in as a child, which was dominated by, of all things, a mine, and the town in this film.) Towns where you pretty much need to escape to somewhere else if there's going to be any hope for a life different from what your parents and grandparents had. And even if you've never lived in a town of that sort, you can probably still identify with characters who dream of a better life and are struggling to achieve it. So, similarity two.

Then there's the notion of people who are haunted by events in their past that they simply can't let go of, and that still rule their lives in the present. The father of this clan keeps his feelings about pretty much everything hidden most of the time (as does everyone else), but in his private moments makes it clear that he simply cannot move on and start living in the present until he finds out what happened to his ex-wife after she abandoned him and their children. The increasing unlikelihood that he'll ever have answers doesn't prevent him from continuing to obsess about the questions. Wouldn't he have a much better chance of a real life if he simply let go? Of course, but so would many of us with our own obsessions, and that doesn't stop us from continuing with them.

The movies like Tarantino's "Pulp Fiction" or Wong Kar-wai's "Chungking Express" with multiple stories that intertwine eventually are trying to tell us about how different people with different lives really do connect. The world of "The Shaft" is a bit different: it gives us three different characters who clearly do connect right from the start, and tells different stories about each of them that shows how a family which OUGHT TO connect often doesn't. Both approaches can tell very powerful stories, but the latter is probably a lot closer to the lives most of us actually lead, and easier to identify with. And this film has a lot to tell us about how we live our lives and how we can CHANGE the way we live them, whether we're from China, America, the U.K. or anywhere else.

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"The Shaft" ("Dixia De Tiankong") Page On IMDB

- [Dixia de tiankong \(2008\)](#)
Directed by Chi Zhang. With Deyuan Luo, Xuan Huang, Luoqian Zheng. Visit IMDb for Photos, Showtimes, Cast, Crew, Reviews, Plot Summary, Comments, Discussions, Taglines, Trailers, Posters, Fan Sites

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