



Big Shot's Funeral 大腕
Dàwàn ('big hand')

Feng Xiaogong 冯小刚, 2001, 90-100 min.

Stars:

Donald Sutherland, Ge You 葛优,
Rosamund Kwan 关之琳 (*Guān Zhīlín*)
Cinematography: Zhang Li 张黎

Grand Jury Prix (Beijing Student FF). **Best Film** (Hundred Flowers Awards).
Best Actor—Mainland China (Chinese Film Media Awards; Hundred Flowers Awards).
Favorite Actor (Beijing Student Film Festival). **Best Supporting Actor** (Hundred Flowers Award).
Best Visual Effect (Beijing Student Film Festival).

Big Shot's Funeral perfectly captures the primal energy and spirit of the popular saying “to get rich is glorious!” (致富光荣 *zhìfù guāngróng*) along with the reassurance that it’s OK to “let some people get rich first” (让一部分人先富起来 *ràng yībùfèn rén xiān fù qǐlái*). Both have been attributed (perhaps apocryphally) to Deng Xiaoping 邓小平, architect of China’s post-Mao economic “reform and opening” (改革开放 *gǎigé kāifàng*). This witty satire on globalization and the rampant obsession with making money by almost any means was made during the second wave of reform: an era of large scale privatization, reduced trade regulations, and a wild-west ethos of entrepreneurialism that coincided with China’s 2001 entry into the WTO.

Crossing cultures via comedy is never without risk, and 20 years ago American reviewers expressed divergent opinions about the movie, ranging from ‘limp comedy and inept storytelling’ to “a slickly packaged, cross-cultural satire” with “outrageous ideas to keep it fresh” and a sly look at “long-held Western attitudes grafted onto Mainland characters”. Critics aside, fans of a relaxed hippy-ish Sutherland and Ge You’s poker-faced humor can look forward to sitting back and enjoying an evening of fanciful cross-cultural entertainment.

Narrative

Don Tyler, an aging American film director, is in Beijing to do a remake of Bertolucci’s film *The Last Emperor*. His loyal and protective bilingual assistant, **Lucy**, hires cameraman **Yoyo** to video a behind-the-scenes documentary of the making of the movie. As Yoyo records, Tyler continually ruminates on the meaning of life and death—a topic that becomes of more than philosophical interest when he suddenly suffers a heart attack and begs Yoyo to arrange a Chinese “comedy funeral” for him.

As Tyler languishes in a coma, Yoyo engages in Herculean efforts to fulfill Tyler’s last wish and recruits his friend **Louis Wang**—an event promoter—to help him plan a huge media extravaganza. The two plan to finance the spectacle by selling advertising space, which attracts a whole shark pool of opportunists willing to do almost anything to turn a profit, including imitating famous brands, pirating videos, etc. Yoyo’s integrity is strained to the breaking point, and the plot thickens when—after all the advertising space has been sold—it seems that Tyler is not going to die after all.

Context

During China’s second stage of economic “reform and opening (1984-2005) privatization rapidly accelerated, most state-owned businesses were liquidated, many governmental controls were withdrawn, even some ‘iron rice bowl’ safety-nets were dismantled. It was a time of destabilization, anxiety, restructuring, frantic entrepreneurialism, and fantastic get-rich-quick schemes. In the middle of this period (2001) China joined WTO and 10 days afterward *Big Shot's Funeral* was released. Talk about timely!

Feng’s Xiaogang’s special genius lies in amplifying real-life practices to the point of absurdity. The movie is full of jokes both more and less recognizable to American audiences: parodies of Chinese celebrities; spoofs of well-known brands and products; elaborate funereal ceremonies, including a specially made movie befitting a national hero; Tyler’s body encased in the Forbidden City next door to Tiananmen Square where Mao lies in his Mausoleum, eternally preserved for public viewing. Once started on their path, not even the challenges of the New York Stock Market and outer space can dampen the exuberant creativity of Yoyo and Louis.

The Chinese term 大腕 *dàwàn* traditionally referred to popular skilled performers with considerable reputations, but by the 1990s the term came to distinguish successful high level managers who operate as brokers among market forces in various levels of culture and commerce, foreign and domestic.¹ Who fits the film's eponymous title *Big Shot*? Is it really Tyler as we first assume? Or Yoyo? Louis Wang? And what is being brokered as funeral rites metamorphose into commercial products and worldwide broadcasts and 'Western' business practices become economics 'with Chinese characteristics'? Could we be watching a playful allegory for how, in an economy where state-subsidized studios had collapsed, a movie director might broker a creative script (comedy funeral) into a successful transnational China-US co-production? Is director Feng Xiaogang, the *real* big shot?

Director: Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚 (b.1958, Beijing)

With his 1997 film *The Dream Factory*, Feng Xiaogang virtually launched the annual Mainland tradition of New Year's blockbuster films (贺岁片 *hesuipian*)² designed to entertain domestic audiences and earn large box-office returns—rather than to promote patriotism (爱国电影 *aiguó diànyǐng*) or attract attention from intellectuals and international film festivals (美术电影 *měishù diànyǐng*). Solidly rooted in the social conditions of their time, Feng's movies have treated the lives of ordinary Beijingers caught up in changing social and economic conditions, with humor, affection, and wild imagination. His movies "emerged both as a compromise with the party film policy, and a successful exploration of a genre that appealed to the mass audience".³ He is now one of the most important figures in contemporary Chinese cinema.

"Chinese people have a great sense of humor," Feng says, "and if that can translate into other languages, it will be even more significant than the success of an action film" (referring at the time to *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*).⁴ Certainly the use of a Hollywood star—Donald Sutherland—seems calculated to attract an American audience, and to my knowledge it is the first of Feng's movies to be commercially distributed in the US.

Star: Donald Sutherland (b.1935, New Brunswick Canada)

Soon after graduating from University of Toronto with double-major in engineering and drama (!) Sutherland attended the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, then worked in repertory theatre for several years, and eventually left London for Hollywood where he began his movie career. As one of the world's best known actors, Sutherland's career spans more than fifty years, and he has received numerous awards.

Big Shot's Funeral is not his first involvement with China: a decade earlier he played the lead in one of the first large-scale Western movies to be made in China: the Canada-China co-production of a biopic of Norman Bethune, a Canadian physician-humanitarian-activist who volunteered as a combat surgeon for the Red Army during the Chinese Civil War and was later lauded by Mao as a national hero of China. *Bethune: Making of a Hero* (1990) can be seen free on YouTube at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5zUrbrTb5J0>.

Star: Ge You 葛优 (b. 1957, Beijing)

Ge You is one of China's most popular and recognizable actors (bald head, dead-pan humor)—and the first Asian to win Best Actor at the Cannes Film Festival (for his lead role in Zhang Yimou's 1993 movie *To Live*.) He has played in a number of other internationally released Chinese films including: *Farewell My Concubine* (1993), *The Emperor's Shadow* (1996), *A World without Thieves* (2004), *The Banquet* (2006), *If You Are the One* (2008), and *Let the Bullets Fly* (2010).

Star: Rosamund Kwan 关之琳 (*Guān Zhīlín*) (b. 1962, Hong Kong)

Outside of Hong Kong, Kwan is best known for co-starring with Jet Li in the Hong Kong series *Once Upon a Time in China* (as '13th Auntie'; 1991-97) and in *Swordsman II* (1992). Her mother was an actress from Shanghai and her father was a star with Shaw Brothers Studios, originally from Shenyang and of Manchu ethnicity. Kwan grew up in Hong Kong and made her film debut in 1982. Although most of her acting career actually consisted of dramatic roles, she is best known internationally for her roles in action films. Kwan retired from acting in 2007.

¹ See Yomi Braester, "Chinese Cinema in the Age of Advertisement: The Filmmaker as a Cultural Broker" in *Culture in the Contemporary PRC*, Michel Hockx and Julia Strauss, eds., 2005. Cambridge University Press. Pp 27-42.

² At least six have been released internationally: *Big Shot's Funeral* 大腕 (2001); *A World without Thieves* 天下无贼 (2004), *The Banquet* 夜宴 (2006); *If You Are the One* (2008); *Aftershock* (2010) and *Youth* (2017).

³ See Rui Zhang, 2005. *Feng Xiaogang and Chinese Cinema after 1989*. Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University. p. 21.

⁴ Erik Eckholm, "Leading Chinese Filmmaker Tries for a Great Leap to the West; Will a Zany Satire Be a Breakthrough for a Popular Director?" *The New York Times*, June 21, 2001, Section E, p. 1.