

Chinese TV Drama Looks at Women Turning 30

By Mike Revzin

Deng Xiaoping promoted the idea, “To get rich is glorious,” but he might have second thoughts if he watched a few episodes of the popular Chinese TV drama called *Nothing But Thirty* (三十而已; *Sān Shí Ēr Yī*.) Some of the glimpses into the lives of Shanghai’s rich are anything but glorious.

The “get rich” slogan, often misattributed to Deng, was actually the title of a 1984 book by Orville Schell about China’s reforms, although Deng did say, “Let some people get rich first.”

The 43-episode TV series, which aired in 2020, is available on YouTube.com (search for *Nothing But Thirty*, English subtitles). It follows the lives of three Shanghai women who share friendship as they are about to turn 30. One, Gu Jian, played by actress Tong Yao, is married to a wealthy entrepreneur. They live in a spectacular riverfront apartment with a stunning view of Shanghai.

Another, Zhong Xiao Qin, played by Mao Xiao Tong, is whiny and immature at home, but well-liked and pleasant at her office job. Her husband is an aloof TV journalist who seems more interested in his tropical fish tanks than in his wife, with whom he constantly bickers.

The third, Wang Man Ni, played by Maggie Jiang, has a high-pressure sales job at a luxury store, where she must contend with sexual harassment, a back-stabbing co-worker and a lack of bathroom breaks. Meanwhile, her parents try to pressure her into coming back to her small hometown, getting married and living a “normal life.” The scenes in which she goes to her hometown to consider that option are well balanced—showing that her parents’ advice is reasonable, but that it might not be the best lifestyle for her.

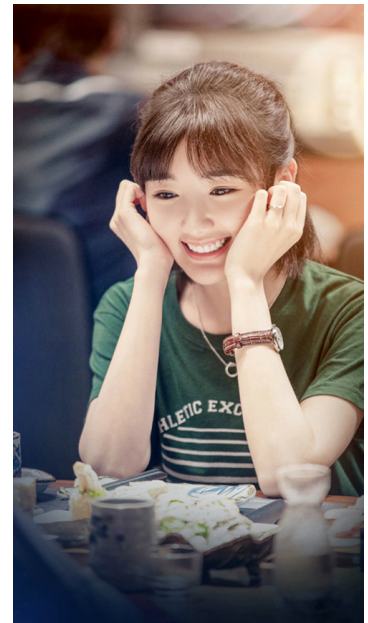
The TV series has attracted a lot of comments on Chinese social media. Some say the series gives a realistic portrayal of the pressures that women face from society as they turn 30, while others say some of the story angles do not represent a woman’s viewpoint.

Some reviewers have said that a better English translation of the title would be “It’s Only 30”—in other words, the characters shouldn’t worry about meeting traditional society’s standards of being married by a certain age.

Each episode switches back and forth between the lives of the three women, with twists, turns, drama and humor not unlike *Desperate Housewives*. The action can be slow at times, but the episodes offer fascinating glimpses into life among the wealthy and middle class in Shanghai.

Gu Jian and her husband, Xu Huan Shan, played by Li Ze Feng, spend considerable time and money kissing up to a pompous woman who can pave the way for their precious son to get into an exclusive kindergarten. Along the way we see the pampered but pressured lives of such youngsters and the pretentious behavior of super-wealthy parents. Much of the excess in their consumer spending involves foreign products, such as Western art and imported wine.

The city of Shanghai should be listed as one of the stars, as each episode has beautiful shots of the spectacularly lit Bund and night skyline, glitzy hotels and



Mao Xiao Tong portrays an office worker.



Maggie Jiang portrays Wang Man Ni, a career woman.

restaurants, and remarkably blue skies and uncrowded streets.

It sometimes seems as if the cellphone should get top billing. Few scenes take place without the characters using their phone to exchange contact information, texting or calling with plot-turning developments.

Gu Jian glides through the streets of Shanghai in a chauffeur-driven car, and is treated to a 30th birthday party that would have made *The Great Gatsby* envious. Other characters in the story engage in lavish shopping sprees or undergo Botox.

The story lines touch on a number of other topics. Characters deal with infidelity, divorce, mistresses, aging parents, a younger boyfriend, pushy in-laws, a shady relative, run-ins with the law, fake goods, corruption and the pressure to drink to excess at company functions.

The people of *Nothing But Thirty* travel by plane, car, hot air balloon or even RV—not on overcrowded buses. But some of them do rub elbows with people from different walks of life. Gu Jian, for example, buys a tea farm in Hunan province, where she sees how the other half lives,



Tong Yao portrays Gu Jian, who has wealth and troubles.

and realizes that her business decisions greatly affect their lives.

Many of the characters are wealthy but troubled. But three characters without speaking roles are portrayed as poor but happy. A couple and their young son run a popular street food cart, working long hours and living in cramped conditions—but always appearing cheerful and loving.

Overall, *Nothing But Thirty* is well worth watching for its glimpse into some of the moral dilemmas that face Chinese society. 友

Exiled Filmmaker Reunites with Mother

A Family Tour

Directed by Ying Liang

Produced by 90 Minutes Film Studio,

Potocol, Shine Pictures

U.S. release 2018

Mandarin, Cantonese with English subtitles
107 minutes

Reviewed by Joann Pittman

Every April the Film Society of Minneapolis-St. Paul holds a two-week International Film Festival, which gives me the chance to catch up on recent Chinese movies. One of the movies on the schedule in 2019 was *A Family Tour*, directed by Ying Liang.

The movie tells the story of a dissident filmmaker named Yang Shu who, after producing a film that angered Chinese authorities, is now living in Hong Kong with her husband and son. She has not seen her aging mother in China for five years, so when she is invited to screen her movie at a film festival in Taiwan, she and her husband plot a reunion, arranging for Yang Shu's mother to join a guided tour to Taiwan at the same time. For several days the family shadows the tour group as they rush around Kaoshiung, meeting up with mom at various tourist stops and restaurants, pretending to be local friends.

It is a story about exile. Yang Shu and her family are in exile from their home in China, something they are reminded of every time someone asks them if they are from Hong Kong or China. Her mother is in exile in her own land due to the forced separation from her daughter.

The mainland tourists are temporarily in exile as well, since they have had to turn over all of their travel documents to the tour guide so none of them will wander away. For the duration of their trip, their tour bus is their home.

At each stop where they meet up, the mother and daughter struggle to re-connect. They talk, reminisce, looking for ways to end the exile. Yang Shu's mother wants her to write an apology for the offending film and return home. Yang Shu wants her

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A Family Tour *(continued)*

mother to move to Hong Kong so she can take care of her.

Yang Shu's husband is in the middle, trying to protect each of them from their love for one another, a love that might compel each of them to do things that would be detrimental to themselves. For the daughter, the price of renouncing her work and returning to China would be giving up her film career. For the mother, moving to Hong Kong would mean turning her back on a country that she has spent a lifetime serving. In the meantime, the police are pressuring her to break off relations with her "bad" daughter.

Does she love her daughter enough to break off relations? Unfortunately, that's a question that thousands of Chinese have had to make over the years as the party-state does not tolerate dual loyalty; when the choice is between the state and the family, one must choose.

The movie is interminably slow and plodding, in a typical Chinese movie sort of way. There are long shots with



Scene from *A Family Tour*.

no dialog or music, sometimes with the characters sitting or walking together. In many ways I felt like I was watching a movie in slow motion.

But maybe that's the point—that life in exile is like being in or watching a slow-motion movie. And since the story is autobiographical for the director, he would know. 友

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