



A FILM BY HUO MENG

# LIVING THE LAND

**International Title:** LIVING THE LAND

**Original Title:** Sheng Xi Zhi Di

**Year:** 2025

**Country:** People's Republic of China

**Language:** Chinese – Henan Dialect

**Running time:** 132

**Aspect ratio:** 1.78

**Speed/Frame Rate:** 24fps

**Sound Format:** 5.1

## SYNOPSIS

In the village of Bawangtai in 1991, time appears to have stood still. Despite the rapid industrialization happening in cities across China, everyday rural life for farming families in the Henan province remains steadfastly tied to the demands of the land. 10-year-old Xu Chuang, the third-born child of one such family, is unceremoniously left with his wheat farmer uncle when his parents and older siblings set out to find work in the Southern city of Shenzhen. Cared for though unable to shake the feeling he doesn't belong with the extended Li family, Chuang finds comfort in a young aunt – who feels similarly uneasy as she is pressured to marry – and his surly but kind nonagenarian great-grandmother. Each season rolls into the next, and Chuang learns the quotidian rhythms of the land which they all till, at once bucolic, cruel, cyclical and nourishing.

The Silver Bear winner for Best Director at the 2025 Berlin Film Festival, Chinese filmmaker Huo Meng's elliptical and elegant sophomore feature proves "a cinema of patience is also a cinema of assurance" (*IndieWire*). Equal parts coming-of-age tale and epic portrait of provincial life, LIVING THE LAND exists at an apex for Chinese culture in the 1990s, "a time when major reforms were transforming China from a nation of rural laborers into the industrial powerhouse it is today" (*The Hollywood Reporter*).









## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

For over three thousand years, until the 1980s, China was an agriculture-based social system, where Chinese farmers created the vast majority of social wealth. People were rooted in the land, and their clothing, food, housing, and transportation all depended on labor, or as the film title says, living on that land. However, due to low productivity, uncontrollable natural disasters and man-made difficulties, this system also brought immense survival pressure to farmers' lives. To survive in such an environment, the Chinese people had to become diligent, resilient, and possess a deep sense of obedience and endurance. Family unity was essential, serving as a foundation for overcoming unknown risks and ensuring stability across generations.

As a result, in the values of the Chinese people, forfeiting individual happiness for the benefit of the nation and the family is often viewed as a noble moral virtue.

By 1991, China's economic reforms and technological revolution quickly extended to the vast rural areas. Industrial machines began to gradually replace manual labor, and resources needed for industrial production, such as petroleum, began to encroach upon the traditional resource of the land. At the same time, urban industrial construction required a large workforce, prompting many farmers to migrate to cities in search of survival opportunities. Under these circumstances, the traditional kinship relations and rural ecological systems that had sustained Chinese agricultural civilization for thousands of years began to disintegrate.

## DIRECTOR'S NOTE

LIVING THE LAND explores the profound impact of this historical moment on the traditions, emotions, and relationships of the Chinese people. Like an unstoppable wind, these changes swept through every aspect of life.

Set in rural China in 1991, the film's story and emotions are rooted in centuries of history, culture, and tradition while also reflecting the mindset of contemporary Chinese society today.

I wanted to depict how, when collectivist social policies collided with traditions shaped over millennia, people were forced to adapt in ways that challenged their very way of life. I also felt it was important to depict the immense pressures that women faced – both socially and physically – that left lasting and often irreversible harm. These topics are vast, but are reflected in the personal stories of this one family.

My cinematographer Guo Daming and I considered the cinematic language to play a very important role. We wanted the film to feel contemporary—not purely naturalistic or confined to realism. How to incorporate my perspective and attitude, while supporting the narrative and creating atmosphere, was a topic of ongoing discussion during the filming process. Long takes, tracking shots, and the composition of intricate tableaux helped us achieve this. Collaborating with composer Wan Jianguo and sound editor Li Tao to build rich, layered sound design was also important in shaping the film's texture.

We shot the film over a year, following the natural seasons to highlight the self-sufficiency of traditional rural life and its deep, cyclical connection to nature. Through the film, audiences witness how people cultivate their own food, build homes from the land, and sew quilts and clothes from the cotton they grow. While these elements are simple to describe in writing, bringing them to life on screen required meticulous planning and execution.

Filming across all four seasons and weaving a narrative that spans four generations allowed us to construct a far-reaching, immersive world where the topics of life, existence, and the passing of time could unfold, while still leaving space for interpretation.

Most importantly, I am deeply grateful to the cast who brought this film to life. Many of them endure immense pressures in their daily lives, which can create an outward impression of indifference or emotional restraint. Yet during filming, each performer infused their role with their own lived experiences, merging seamlessly with their characters. Their performances reveal not just fictional portrayals but deeply personal, intricate emotional landscapes—layers of feeling that might otherwise remain hidden. This reaffirmed for me that, no matter how harsh life can be under an unyielding system, every individual carries an innate need for art and expression.

I will always remember Zhang Caixia, who played Grannie Guilan, saying to me at the end of filming: “Thank you, Meng. I want to live my own life from now on.”

Huo Meng



DIRECTOR

# HUO MENG



HUO Meng was born in Taikang, Henan Province, China in 1984. He first studied law at the Communication University of China before embarking on a master's degree in cinema at the same institution. In 2018, he made his first fiction feature *CROSSING THE BORDER - ZHAOGUAN*, which won the Pingyao International Film Festival Fei Mu Award for Best Director, the Fajr International Film Festival Best Asian Director award, and a Best Director nomination at the Golden Rooster Film Festival. Selected by director Jia Zhangke, *CROSSING THE BORDER - ZHAOGUAN* was screened at the 70th Berlinale as part of the "On Transmission" special program.

Selected filmography:

*CROSSING THE BORDER - ZHAOGUAN* - (Guo Zhao Guan, 2018)





## CREW

**Directed by:** Huo Meng

**Written by:** Huo Meng

**Production companies:**

Shanghai Film Group

Phoenix Legend Films Co.,Ltd.

Floating Light (Foshan) Film and Culture Co.,Ltd.

Bad Rabbit (Shanghai) Pictures Co.,Ltd.

Lianray Pictures

**Producer:** Zhang Fan

**Executive producers:** Xu Chunping, Yao Chen

**Presented by:** Wang Jun, Jiang Hao, Yao Chen, Cai Yuan

**Coproducers:** Zhu Xi, Zhai Miaomiao, Liu Yi, Li Xinran

**Associate Producers:** Cao Yu, Zeng Jiyuan, Wang Hongwei, He Xiaoqing

**Cinematographer/DoP:** Guo Daming

**Set Designer:** Yu Shuyao

**Editor:** Huo Meng

**Sound Editor/Mix:** Li Tao

**Composer:** Wan Jianguo

## CAST

Wang Shang (Chuang)

Zhang Yanrong (Great Grannie)

Zhang Chuwen (Xiuying)





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