

Xu Geng about YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE

How not to become a professional football player

In China football might seem to be the new religion, but there's kids in rural villages who have never even seen a football for real. They need a teacher like Xi Ge to explain them the rules of the game and infect them with a passion for playing. YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE stirs football mania on the high mountain plateaus of Sichuan. Until a disastrous earthquake brings an end to the game. The film that director Xu Cheng brought to the Zlin Festival, has an intriguing opening sentence: "Let me introduce myself. I am this ball."

Xu Geng: All happiness and sadness in this film are connected to this ball. From the very beginning we tried different perspectives from which to tell our story, but none of them felt fully satisfying. Finally we realised this old, worn-out football was like an eye perceiving all the things we see, and sometimes even more than we can see. It can understand the hearts and read the minds of the children. That is

how a ball became our main observer.

The story is set in a beautiful, isolated part of China, described by the school principal as "a remote corner of the mountains where everybody wants to leave".

Xu: With 9.6 million square kilometres and 1.4 billion inhabitants, China is a huge country. The eastern region has seen a better social and economic development, due to natural resources. The western part is a mountainous area, where living standards are relatively lagging behind. Many people want to escape from these remote areas and head for the city. Our story is situated more than 10 years ago, that region has evolved a lot since then. The place where the earthquake took place has been rebuilt, like the new elementary school that you see at the end of the movie.

It is strange for us to realise that there are kids in this world who have never played football.



Xu: In China, the popularity of football is increasing enormously, especially in the cities where football fields pop up everywhere for children and adults to play. But in some remote areas, even flat land is hard to find. Playing football is obviously impossible there, and some of those children might have never seen a real football. All their knowledge of football comes from pictures and television. These kids have their own games and toys, that most likely we have never seen before. The world is big, there are always things we don't understand.

In one scene the kids are playing

football in the pouring rain. How was that scene recorded?

Xu: As a director you're in control of many things, but not of nature. In order to actually shoot that scene, we had several fire trucks spraying water into the sky, creating a heavy rainfall. I'll tell you a secret: from the very beginning, I was scared to shoot that scene. Winters are extremely cold in Sichuan. My biggest concern was children getting sick from the icy rain. Although the film absolutely needed this scene, I didn't dare to record it until the end of the shooting period. We prepared everything as precisely as possible, we set up tents on the riv-





erside, we collected electric heaters and dry towels, the entire staff was standby...

And?

Xu: The rain was heavy, the wind was strong, the temperature was cold and everything was soaked. Each shot was difficult so we needed several takes. At first, some kids complained about the rain being too hard and painful. But as we continued, they got more and more excited. When we took a break, some kept playing in the water. Only one child couldn't help but cry... because it was in the script. None of my fears were finally realised. The next day, every child appeared on

set, no one fell sick. Maybe that was a gift they got from playing football: a healthy body.

The teacher in your film is more than just a teacher. What other important roles can a teacher play in the lives of young people?

Xu: Xi Ge (meaning 'happy brother' in Chinese) could have applied for better schools in wealthier regions, but he himself decided to apply for this remote mountain village. Chinese people believe that gaining knowledge is the most important thing in life. Because of his own childhood experience, Xi Ge understands other qualifications can be important too, such

as music or playing football. Things that make you happy and strong. Besides 'physical education' and math, Xi Ge takes on several other courses. This used to be common in rural China, due to a lack of qualified teachers. Probably Xi Ge never realised what important marks he left on the lives of those children.

Sports is often all about victory or loss. In YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE other things are equally important as winning or losing.

Xu: Winning is a good thing, but losing isn't bad either. What this film really cares about is not children overcoming their opponents, but overcoming themselves. People should check this one line at the end of the film: "So far, none of these children have become football players, but Xi Ge continues teaching children to play." He is not training professional athletes, but raising healthy and brave people, whom in their future lives will know how to remain optimistic.

Although the earthquake tragedy will mark them forever.

Xu: Our young actors are true survivors of that catastrophe, but they were babies when it happened, they have no vivid memories to the trage-

dy. Making this film didn't wake up any old traumas. For people in this region the psychological recovery has been a long term process on which they've been working for more than 10 years. We've screened YOU'LL NEVER WALK ALONE for the Sichuan community and that meant a lot to them.

The film introduces a girl as a true soccer hero.

Xu: Long time ago we were watching a kids' football game, with two strong teams, playing like adults. We noticed a frail goalkeeper fiercely defending his territory. Suddenly, his hair was hanging loose and we were surprised to find out it was a girl. We immediately understood our script was in need of a brave girl. She is a petite football hero and also just an ordinary girl-next-door. Sometimes she is more brave than the boys, sometimes she is spoiled like a naughty little princess. In a boys-only football team, that girl Sang Guo is like a ray of sunlight. The boys in the team don't see her as a girl, they see her as a football player and they grant her with a cool nickname.

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