Film on livestreaming in China wins SXSW award

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Independent filmmaker Wu Hao's documentary People's Republic of Desire, a film exploring the surreal reality of "live-streaming" social media stars and their fans in China, has won the Grand Jury Award at SXSW (South by Southwest) 2018 in Austin, TX.  
A well-told story combined with artfully employed digital graphic techniques, the film presents the contrast between virtual glamor and harsh reality in China's digital universe.  
Most in the audience were exposed to this kind of online universe for the first time, and the powerful story left them deeply impressed and touched.  
"All the money they spent, it's a lot of money. I am still processing the story. It's beautiful but it makes me sad," a viewer told Wu and the audience after the screening.  
"I cried toward the end," another viewer said.  
Wu, a scientist by training who is based in New York, had dabbled in business and worked at Alibaba and TripAdvisor before focusing on a film career. He discussed the film with the audience and China Daily after a screening at SXSW.  
Wu began to research a new project in 2014 on what new technology was doing to young people and what Chinese society was going through when a friend told him about YY, a Chinese multi-billion-dollar company listed on the Nasdaq.  
"I just quit my job in China at TripAdvisor and I considered myself an expert on China's internet business, yet I had no clue," said Wu. "There are rich people, poor people and internet celebrities all getting together in this online community."  
Regardless how rich or poor they are, they all have needs unmet and look for fulfillment online, Wu said. At YY's live-streaming platform, everyone plays a role and is a willing participant in the game to gain fame or to admire their favorite stars, to make big money or to spend it big.  
"Everybody is being exploited by the platform but everybody is happy to do it," Wu said. "One thing many viewers take away is how we are all being exploited by online platforms. I myself am always on Facebook, I am also on Twitter. There is something I get out of it.  
"But to what extent are we willing to give ourselves to the platforms, to what extent do we separate our real life in order to have a virtual life? I don't have a good answer and I am still addicted to the internet," Wu said.  
While the story is shocking to many, there are parallels in the US, Wu said. After all, there are YouTube stars and Instagram stars that many people don't follow. "We also have losers here. We also have lonely young people looking for validation online, people who show off online looking for gratification."  
The film is also about capitalism, Wu said. The difference is that in the US there is the so-called lifestyle and brand to package it, while in China people talk about money directly.  
Wu spent roughly eight months filming Big Li and Shen Man, the two social media stars, and some of their fans, ranging from poor migrant workers to rich business owners.  
The story covers their real life and online streaming in a span of two years. Some footage features intimate personal details. Wu said he achieved this by being persistent and staying long enough for people to forget the camera was rolling.  
Though the finished story is complicated, lots of material was not included in the final edit.  
"What you see is on the surface," Wu said. "The reality is more complex, their personal lives and the platform is more complex. I did so to make the film digestible. I included Shen Man's crying footage because she was being vulnerable [even though] she knew she was on camera," Wu said  
Wu updated the audience on the lives of his main characters: they are still on YY. Big Li and Dabao got back together and they don't fight as much. Dabao was a housewife for two years and now owns another agency. Shen Man is still live-streaming but with an ebbing popularity.  
This is Wu's third documentary. He also directed Beijing or Bust in 2005 and The Road to Fame in 2014. He said he's interested in telling stories about China because there are a lot of stories there and he has access to them.

http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201803/15/WS5aa993eda3106e7dcc141b14.html