

Document Citation

Title	The survivalist
Author(s)	Alvin Lu
Source	<i>San Francisco Bay Guardian</i>
Date	2000 Feb 23
Type	review
Language	English
Pagination	59
No. of Pages	1
Subjects	
Film Subjects	Yi ge dou bu neg shao (Not one less), Zhang, Yimou, 1999

The survivalist

Not One Less revisits Gong Li's ghost.

By Alvin Lu

The last film of Zhang Yimou's before *Not One Less* to receive distribution in the United States was 1995's *Shanghai Triad*, a solid, florid gangster melodrama that's better known as Zhang's last film with Gong Li. One could argue that one effect of their professional breakup, among other factors, was to keep his next work, 1997's urban-nonnarrative experiment, *Keep Cool*, out of stateside distribution. Zhang is the most internationally known filmmaker in Chinese history (excepting a smattering of Hong Kong action directors, like Bruce Lee — yeah, he directed *Return of the Dragon*, right?), but out here, to most folks who even pay attention to Chinese films at all, he's still crawling out from under Gong Li's shadow. That might be a curious way of putting it, if one believes that the creature that was (and continues to be sold as) Gong Li was strictly a figment of Zhang's imagination, but it's probably closer to some kind of truth, as with Dietrich and von Sternberg, that they created each other in those early films.

Despite a quarrel at Cannes last year in which Zhang in a snit pulled his films, he has more or less completed his post-Gong Li comeback with two closely timed offerings, *The Road Home*, a romantic melodrama (starring, you guessed it, the "next Gong Li," 18-year-old Zhang Ziyi), and this film, a slightly handheld-y docu-style account of a rural school substitute overcoming poverty, starring nonprofessional actors, most of them kids. I haven't seen *Road Home*, but it sounds from its description like the kind of dreamy costume work that Zhang's famous for, while *Not One Less* openly recalls Zhang's most critically regarded, if most atypical film, *The Story of Qiu Ju*, which featured arguably Gong Li's best performance, as an egg-shaped, straight-talking peasant woman out for retribution.

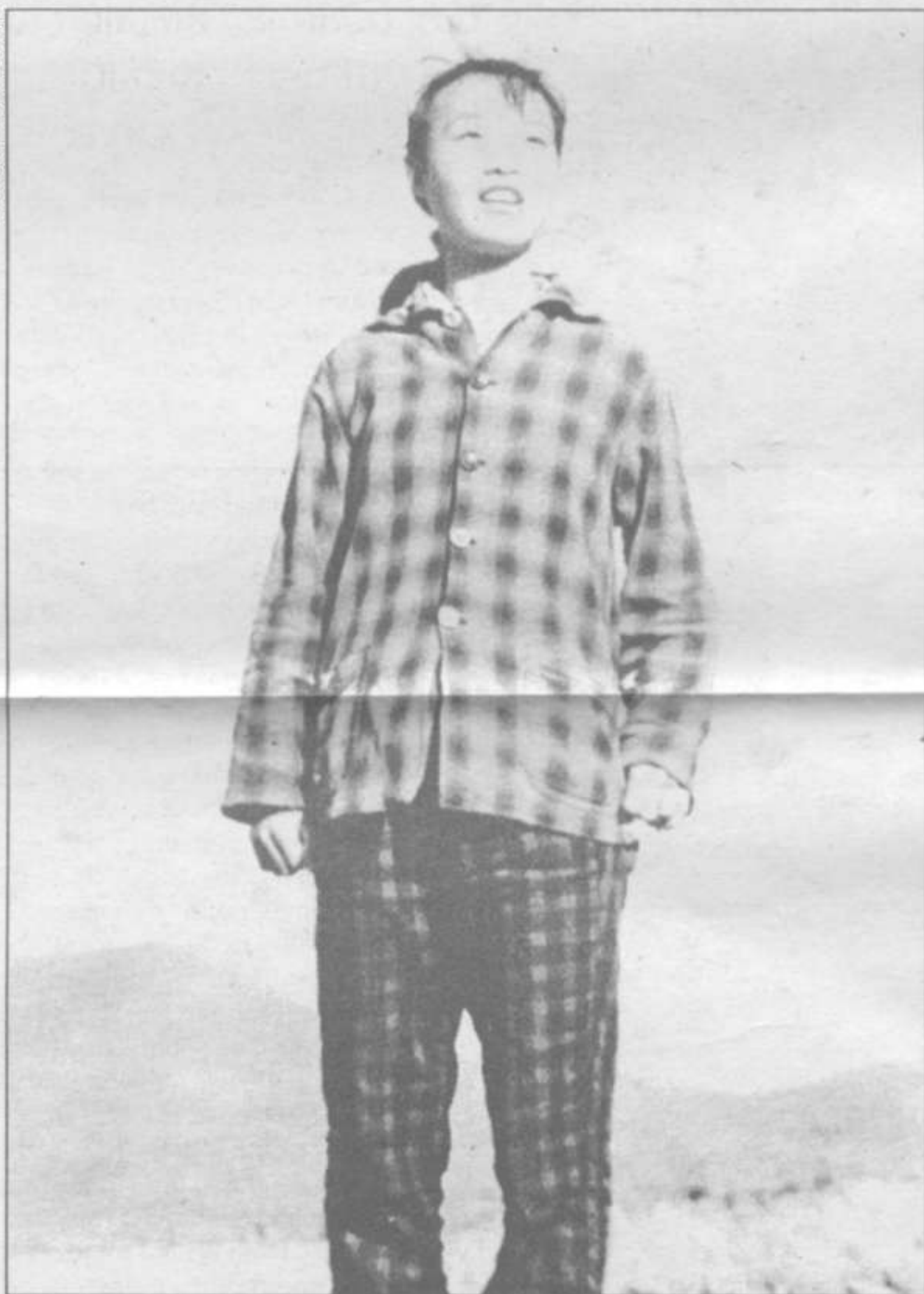
Considering what we know of Zhang's background (he sold his own blood to buy his first camera, his reputation as the "peasant director," etc.), it's the latter genre — oddly uplifting, gently satirical survivalist epics about not particularly gifted or intelligent people beating insurmountable odds on the strength of determination alone — that's closest to Zhang's heart, and from where his best work, *Qiu Ju* and the intricately patterned *To Live*, springs.

Here, an inexperienced substitute teacher in an almost laughably poor rural backwater has been told not to lose even one of her 28 students; when one of them uproots to find work in the city to support his sick mom, she

follows him there, resolved to bring him back. The comparison to *Qiu Ju*, which is also about a naive, strong-willed countrywoman searching for something in the dizzying maze of urban development, is inevitable and not very favorable. Zhang can be a

lescent. But given a goal, she can be relentlessly enterprising to attain it, and it's her unreflective motivation, filtered through Zhang's empathetic understanding of peasant determination, that drives the film. Her climactic encounter with a television camera is the most absurd moment in Zhang's oeuvre — you can feel him loosening up as a director even as he milks every uncomfortable second. Another comparison to *Qiu Ju*: whereas Gong Li's character sought some manifestation of concrete justice, Wei is motivated by something more abstract. *Not One Less*'s materialist focus on economics, as suggested

PHOTO BY BAI XIAOTIAN



Uplifting: Wei Minzhi plays an inexperienced substitute teacher in a rural backwater.

gifted, if somewhat formulaic, storyteller, but while *Qiu Ju* managed to smooth over its more heinous plot contrivances with a gently biting sense of satire, *Not One Less* can come across as kid-movie schematic. The result is a somewhat incongruous conjunction of self-consciously gritty realism and Marxist Disney fable. The use of nonprofessional actors, in this case, exacerbates the film's believability rather than enhances it.

Still, the 13-year-old lead, played by Wei Minzhi, and the absurd sight of a 13-year-old teaching a class of 10-year-olds, is the film's best trick. And her anti-cute-and-precocious performance is the movie's true source of authenticity: as played by Wei, this preadolescent is a sullen, restless, rather lazy, and impenetrable preado-

in its mathematic title, lends it a more overtly Marxist theme, justice through redistribution of wealth. Somehow this all seems congruent with the shameless Coke product placement in the middle of the movie.

Once the Chinese director hardest hit by accusations of selling out to the West, Zhang's lately been accused of selling out to the Party. Is there a difference? He's continued to make films, regardless, with or without the star who helped put him on the map, with state or international backers, making evident by now that, for Zhang, sellout has always been another word for survivor. ❖

'Not One Less' opens Fri/25 at Bay Area theaters. See Movie Clock, page 110, for show times.