

# Director casts light on gender inequality

Acclaimed film on sexual abuse arises from questions about what is wrong with society

By WANG YUKE

**I** have to say that gender inequality is still pervasive in society, (and) demonstrated in all aspects of life in subtle ways," said Chinese director Vivian Qu at the Singapore International Film Festival which kicked off on Nov 23 with the screening of her film, *Angels Wear White*.

News about sexual abuse in schools and kindergartens has increasingly surfaced in recent years and sparked heated discussion on social media.

"I was appalled by those incidents. At the same time, it was heart-wrenching and I was puzzled about what's wrong with society," Qu said, explaining her reasons for making such a sensitive and potentially controversial film.

She spent a lot of time developing the idea before starting the project.

*Angels Wear White* tells the story of two teenage girls sexually molested by a police commissioner in a motel. The sole witness to the crime is the motel receptionist Mia (played by Wen Qi), who uses her phone to film the CCTV footage as the commissioner forces himself into the girls' room.

However, Mia is hesitant to come forward with the evidence during the investigation for fear of losing her job as she holds a fake identity card.

The life of Xiaowen (played by Zhou Meijun), one of the victims, is shattered in the wake of the traumatizing experience as physical punishment and psychological torture from her mother reduce her to sheer despair.

Xiaowen's father (played by Geng Le), who is the offender Liu's subordinate, decides his daughter is to blame — reflecting the corrosive nature of social biases toward women.

The prevalence of sexual abuse and molestation sheds light on a blind spot in society — endemic misogyny and the double standard

which assumes that a woman preyed upon by men is herself to blame, for being seductive.

The film has won recognition internationally as well as at home, including the award for Best Director at the 2017 Golden Horse Festival (in Taiwan) in November, Best Film at the International Antalya Film Festival (Turkey) in October and Best Director at the International Film Festival of India in November.

The only Chinese entry to compete for Best Film at the 2017 Venice Film Festival, *Angels Wear White* was also a Best Film nomination at this year's London Film Festival.

Since films discussing sexual abuse and gender inequality are rare on the Chinese mainland, Qu's attempt is considered a bold venture and it made sense that the film had more impact in international film markets.

While many countries including China have made efforts to minimize gender injustice, it still exists in Chinese society and can be felt at the workplace and in everyday life.

## Business dilemma

Qu made reference to a female friend's dilemma. Her friend was the creative director of a major advertising agency and the leading members of her team were women. When they met with clients for business cooperation or signing contracts, they tended to bring a male colleague along, particularly if the project could generate profits worth more than 10 million yuan (\$1.5 million).

"They had noticed that if only the three of them (women) showed up, clients would be hesitant and apprehensive," said Qu, expressing her frustration.

She added that on most occasions the male colleague did nothing but enhance the agency's credibility. Nevertheless, his presence did increase the chances of reaching an agreement with business partners.

There is widespread anxiety among Chinese parents of girls that if their children hold high academic



Award-winning director Vivian Qu (left) and actress Zhou Meijun at the recent Singapore International Film Festival. Zhou features in Qu's movie *Angels Wear White* as a victim of sexual molestation. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY ASIA WEEKLY

qualifications they could face difficulty in getting married and end up being single, as men could be deterred from approaching such women.

According to Qu, the traditional mind-set that "women are supposed to be less intelligent and less educated, holding lower positions with less say in the labor force than their male counterparts", attests to the double standard in society.

The film is a story about women, whether seen from the perspective of the victim, Xiaowen, and the discrimination she faces in the aftermath of her ordeal, or from that of the female witness, Mia, who was reluctant to speak the truth.

And according to Qu, it poses a number of questions: "What does a woman's body mean? Is a woman's body tradable? Where does a woman's value lie?"

These questions are not exclusive to the two main characters, said Qu. They are universal issues that could confront any other female characters in the film.

"Mia could someday suffer the same fate as Xiaowen. And Xiaowen could become the sole witness of a sexual molestation, and they could someday become mothers of a sexually abused teenage girl."

The theme that runs through the film is how women make their choices under different circumstances.

Despite conscious efforts to narrow the social injustice in China and improve the social status of women, society remains male-dominated. This attitude has been entrenched in Chinese culture since ancient times.

Women are expected to play domestic roles and have little voice in making major decisions. This is

not only an accepted notion in male communities but taken for granted by some women themselves.

The implication is that when some entrepreneurial women do not want to walk the traditional paths that would lead them to become housewives, society greets them with obstacles and raised eyebrows.

## Social obligations

Qu argued that while sexual abuse is not a rare subject or focus in films today, those films might zoom in on the victimized female characters while overlooking the other part of the story — how those in the know react to the incidents.

She said in *Angels Wear White*, the use of the dual perspectives of Xiaowen, the victim, and Mia, the witness, is "intended to inspire the public to inspect and examine how well we would perform our social responsibilities and obligations".

With the instant consumption of news on mobile devices, every one of us, like never before, is a witness to what happens in far corners of the world, Qu said.

When we spot crime news online, questions that deserve reflection, according to Qu, include: "How does each of us consume the news? How do we digest the victims' hardships? How will we respond and what actions could we take?"

Qu said she is no stranger to challenges during film production. But this time, events took a devastating turn. On the fourth night of shooting the film, Qu fractured her ribs. She could have halted everything and resumed after full recovery, but decided against it.

The teenage actresses "were growing so fast that if I had put

it off for several months, I (probably) wouldn't have been able to cast Zhou Meijun who was already noticeably taller", said Qu, adding that the selection process to find these talented young women had been meticulous. Casting had taken half a year.

Qu studied visual arts in New York before returning to China and working on independent film productions. It was the experience gained from her years overseas that sowed the seeds of fascination and invited her to the world of film.

"I was exposed to avant-garde styles and genres of films emerging from and cutting across Europe, such as the French New Wave and Italian Neorealism. I watched great volumes of masterpieces of these two categories, which were inaccessible in China at that time," recounted Qu, who described it as eye-opening and life-changing.

While Qu was intrigued by the art of filmmaking, she did not expect to direct straight away. "To be a director in those years required qualifications and hands-on experience, unlike today when everyone can be a director, making films on their own devices."

She casually penned stories on paper, recording fleeting thoughts. "I realized that film was the best art form to fuse visual image, literature and music together. That's what I had been seeking."

While taking care not to reveal details about future projects, Qu said she would not confine her creativity to female-related topics. "But my serious regard for women's well-being will be carried throughout my creations and channeled into my works."