

Master Cheng (PG) Finland/China 2019

3 October 2022

DIRECTOR: **Mika Kaurismäki**

(Finnish with English subtitles) Running time: 114 minutes

LEADING PLAYERS: **Pak Hon Chu** (Cheng), **Anna Maija Tuokko** (Sirkka), **Lucas Hsuan** (Niu Niu), **Karl Väänänen** (Romppainen), **Vesa-Matti Loiri** (Vilppula), **Paula Miettinen** (Mervi), **Hannu Oravisto** (Police Officer), **Jonne Kaaretkoski** (Police Officer), **Helka Periaho** (Teacher), **Kari Koivukangas** (Bus driver).

SCREENPLAY: **Hannu Oravisto**. PHOTOGRAPHY: **Jari Mutikainen**. EDITING: **Tuuli Kuittinen**. MUSIC: **Anssi Tikanmäki**.

Cheng, a Chinese widower, steps off a bus with his son at a roadside diner in a remote corner of Finland. Armed with little English, much less Finnish, he manages nevertheless to communicate that he is looking for 'Fongtron'. Who, or what, *fongtron* is remains unclear for some time, but it clearly matters enough for him to stick around, helping Sirkka, the overworked owner, with the cooking. When a coachload of Chinese tourists arrives, stupefied by a diet of sausage and dumplings, he comes into his own.

Master Cheng belongs indisputably to that subgenre of films concerned with the power of food to heal, of which *The Scent of Green Papaya* and *Babette's Feast* are notable examples. (*Fried Green Tomatoes, Eat Drink Man Woman, The Lunchbox...* We can probably all make our own lists!) The sight of all those fresh ingredients delights the eye and the emotional payload gladdens the heart, so even if there is little new here, your committee makes no apologies for including this variation on a feelgood standard!

There is a sadness in Cheng that is all too evident, and Sirkka also has a backstory of romantic disappointment, so that it is unsurprising when the screenplay begins to push them together. Another thread is the isolation of the boy, forever drawn to his mobile phone, and the culture clash with the locals, which is a source of humour rather than suspicion. Fans of Aki Kaurismäki's films will recognize some character types here; no accident since director Mika is the former's brother. The underwritten secondary characters are perhaps one of the flaws of Oravisto's genial script, a shortcoming perhaps even shared by the principals!

That is about it. Do not expect many moments of drama: mostly this is a narrative of elements falling into place rather than dangers avoided and obstacles overcome. It is about the grieving

process and the need for time to begin again, and so there are many shots of the vast, Nordic landscape, tranquil and empty. Song also plays a part in bonding the characters together, the music providing a poignant bridge between past suffering and the present moment.

Chu and Tuokko give subtly modulated performances as Cheng and Sirkka, his eastern reserve finding its complement in her brisk directness before they each adjust to the other in halting stages. Lucas Hsuan, as the boy Niu Niu, acquits himself well in a part that seems to be there as if to say: this is how children sublimate their pain.

In the end, the characters of *Master Cheng* do not progress a great deal beyond their national stereotypes, and though this culinary advert for interracial harmony may be nourishment for the soul, it is undoubtedly a dish more sweet than sour.

David Clare