REVIEW


This is one of five films about a North Chinese village by Carma Hinton and Richard Gordon. Because Carma Hinton grew up in the village that these films document, they utterly lack the distance and didactic quality that one ordinarily sees in cinematic studies of rural China. The participants simply talk and act as though no one were there except neighbors.

This film is not about medical theory or “professional” practice. The doctor is a hereditary practitioner with little education beyond what his father gave him, and we see him training his little son in day-to-day chores such as chopping dried medicines. In this remarkably sympathetic portrait there are no artificial borders between his clinical work, his private life, and his religious faith (like a large number of the people in this village, he is Catholic). His living room is his clinic. In it we see him gently dealing with a mentally deranged patient, using simple acupuncture and the “Nerve No. 1” formula that he inherited from his father. The improvement in the patient is unmistakable. This and other episodes make it hard to overlook that what matters in Chinese medicine is not miraculous therapies or high technology—there is none of either here—but depth of understanding and the quality of human interaction. These make the best possible use of limited traditional resources for manipulating body states.

I have used this film to general satisfaction in classroom teaching. It encourages discussion of many dimensions of medicine. I know of none nearly as good for the purpose.

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