

ANN HUI'S *BOAT PEOPLE*



Boat People (Chinese: 投奔怒海 *Tau ban no hoi*; literally "Into the Raging Sea") is an award-winning Hong Kong film directed by Ann Hui, first shown in theaters in 1982. The film stars George Lam, Andy Lau, Cora Miao, and Season Ma. At the second Hong Kong Film Awards, Boat People won awards for Best Picture, Best Director, Best New Performer, Best Screenplay, and Best Art Direction. It was also screened out of competition at the 1983 Cannes Film Festival.[2][3] In 2005, at the 24th

Hong Kong Film Awards, Boat People was ranked 8th in the list of 103 best Chinese-language films in the past 100 years.[4]

Boat People was the last film in Hui's "Vietnam trilogy". It recounts the plight of the Vietnamese people after the communist takeover following the Fall of Saigon ending the Vietnam War.

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ANN HUI'S *BOAT PEOPLE* – CANNES 1983

ATTACK IN HONG KONG

by Harlan Kennedy



"I don't know what Political Truth is," Hong Kong director Ann Hui said brusquely, in answer to a question, as we sat on the sun-flecked terrace of the Carlton Hotel in Cannes. "All I know is that I stand by the statements I make in *Boat People*, the things I say and present in it. I have been under a lot of attack in Hong Kong, as well as here, for the movie and its politics. I've been bandied about by one party and another as anti-Communist – which I firmly state that I am *not*. The film has been shamelessly used by political parties as a weapon for attacking other parties. But *Boat People* is a survival story set in a tragic moment in history. It's not a propaganda statement against Communism."

Ann Hui's *Boat People* (*Return To Danang*) came to the 1983 Cannes Film Festival as the most highly classified *film surprise* of the festival's 36-year history. Even after it had first been shown, many festivalgoers (especially those not given to scouring the small print of their daily movie schedules) didn't know it was in the program. Only the gathering rumble of debate in the movie's wake woke Cannes up to the fact that there was an "event" in their midst.

The movie, though Hong Kong-financed, was filmed in Mainland China (on Hainan Island and in the city of Zhajian) with full cooperation from the government of the People's Republic. Set in Vietnam in 1978, three years after the Liberation, *Boat People* paints a harshly unremitting picture of a country riven with poverty and tyranny, in an attempt to explain just why hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese have put their lives at risk to flee by boat to hoped-for safety and freedom in Hong Kong.

Boat People is the fourth feature film by 36-year-old Hui, who is justly reckoned second only to King Hu (*A Touch of Zen*) in her homeland as a stylist, a story teller, and an explosive movie innovator. Her first two films were the snazzily cut, galvanic thrillers *The Secret* (*Feng Jie*) and *The Spooky Bunch* (*Zhuang Dao Zheng*), which romped through the international festival circuits in 1979 and 1980. She followed those in 1981 with her first "boat person" film, *The Story of Woo Viet* (*Wu Yue De Gushi*), which was screened at Cannes' Directors Fortnight in 1982. Ann Hui insists that *Woo Viet*, like its successor, *Boat People*, is not a political diatribe but a human story.

"In *Woo Viet* I showed a young Vietnam refugee who leaves a camp in Hong Kong to go to America, only to be trapped on the way in the Philippines. Because the film is very adventurous, very melodramatic, and uses American B-movie visual styles and techniques, people wouldn't take it seriously as a social

comment. But if you look at the film's story, the message is very clear. This man Woo Viet cannot survive in the ultra-materialistic, capitalist world he finds himself in. I think if people take *Woo Viet* and *Boat People* together, they will see that the political 'messages' cancel each other out!"

Nonetheless, *Boat People* is being handled like a keg of dynamite. The top-secret status accorded the film at Cannes was far from accidental. Originally it had been picked for the festival's Main Competition. But the French Socialist government, anxious about their diplomatic relations with Vietnam, insisted on viewing the movie first – an unprecedented demand. The film was screened, festival director Gilles Jacob was told to remove it from the Competition, and Hui was given a choice between screening it in the Directors Fortnight or as the *film surprise*. In either case publicity was to be kept to a minimum.

She chose the latter. And the film was finally smuggled in, refugee-style, as a last-minute addendum to the official program, with an unprecedented lack of fanfare.

The movie pulls no punches; but Hui vigorously denies that any of the events depicted, which were based on the firsthand reports of refugees or reporters who had come from Vietnam, were crudely exaggerated.

● *Boat People* follows the adventures of a Japanese photo-journalist, Akutagawa (played by the Hong Kong actor Lam), who revisits Vietnam in 1978, three years after having witnessed the Communist victory over the forces of South Vietnam and its American allies. Akutagawa becomes the audience's eyes and ears. He witnesses hunger in the slums, police brutality in the streets, corruption among the local officials. He befriends a poverty-stricken Danang family living on a combination of wits, street-wise cynicism, and a flair for scavenging. (The daughter and the older brother coolly riffle the effects of men who have been executed by firing squad; the widowed mother becomes a prostitute.) And he meets a petty thief who is later hauled off to a distant labor camp, euphemistically dubbed a New Economic Zone, where we follow his hair-raising ordeals digging for unexploded American land mines and his doomed attempt to flee the country on a refugee boat. The vessel is ambushed and fired on, with loss of all lives, by a Vietnamese patrol boat. That is based on a real event," Hui told me. "In the real story the boat was sunk. What happened was that the Vietnamese had two patrol boats which fired into the hull of the refugee boat and then went around and around it, until they created a great whirlpool, so that the whole boat was sunk. It was in all the newspapers in Hong Kong at the time. But we couldn't shoot the whirlpool, because technically it was impossible for us. It's a pity, because it would have been a much more impressive scene. But we kept the real point of the incident, which is that Vietnamese officers deliberately 'set up' escape attempts – pocketing the bribes beforehand, of course – and then ambushed the boats."

The sources for the film's story and the stories within the film, Hui told me, stem from the hundreds of interviews she conducted with Vietnamese refugees beginning in 1978, when the boats that made it were flooding into Hong Kong harbor. I asked her how many changes the *Boat People* script had gone through before the final version was reached.

"Well, the script went through four or five rewrites," says Hui. "First we tried to concentrate mainly on the story of Tô Minh, the prisoner who tries to escape on that boat. In the original script he gets away and most of the film is set at sea. But when we were location-hunting before production began, our cameraman said we would probably need the set-up of *Guns of Navarone* to shoot the sea scenes properly! So we decided to concentrate instead on the first part of the script set on land and expand it. This allowed us to introduce new characters like the Vietnamese army officers and the Madame in the bar – representative types of the people who were left over from an older regime.

"During our research," continues Hui, "we came across a book written by a Japanese reporter called *Letter to Uncle Wah*. It's set in Vietnam in 1974 and written in the form of a diary for a little girl. And we found, when comparing this account with conditions in Vietnam after the Liberation, that the living standards of the very poor had not basically changed. If anything, they were worse. So the details of the diary could be transposed to 1978.

"And then we finally hit upon an overall mechanism for telling the story, which was to have a point-of-view character. Someone who is not suffering, an outsider; although in our story he does eventually get involved by helping the daughter of the Danang family to escape by boat. And so we created the fictional Japanese reporter, Akutagawa, who was an amalgam of two real people. One is the very warm, gentle, more 'sentimental' reporter who wrote the little girl's diary. The other is based on a Japanese reporter who had been in Vietnam in 1975, during the Liberation, and went back in 1980. I met him in Tokyo and he showed me his photos from Vietnam and told me how he'd been treated there."

● Having knitted together the movie's script, Hui had to submit it to the Chinese authorities. China lent several of the film's actors (though the leading players were from Hong Kong) and virtually all the extras. Hui was given permission to adapt buildings and street fronts so that they matched photographic records of Vietnam. She was also able to use items of clothing borrowed from some of the 20,000 Vietnamese settled

on collective farms on Hainan Island. Having given so much cooperation, I asked, did the Mainland government want any changes made to the script?

"They told us to change some details. They said the script had to be as *factually* accurate as possible. But they never imposed any propaganda demands on me. You know, 'Put in two lines here saying how terrible Vietnam is.' Nothing like that."

Boat People was made in both of the main Chinese languages, Mandarin and Cantonese. "Which means," says Hui, "it will be distributed in Mainland China as well as in the usual movie markets for Hong Kong films. That's Taiwan, Malaysia-Singapore, and all the Chinatowns of the world."

The film has also been signed up for America, by the newly-formed company Spectrafilm. There was a possibility, I suggested to Hui, that *Boat People* could create the same kind of stir as Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*. "I like *The Deer Hunter*," Hui says. "And I quite understand what Michael Cimino was trying to do: to tell a classic story with that particular background. But people look at it from the point of view of politics, like my film. I understand both viewpoints. But the thing is I cannot *work* understanding both viewpoints, because the movie must be told from one single point of view. If you keep qualifying your statements, you end up not saying anything."

● Perhaps only a filmmaker tossed at birth right into – and then right out of – the political epicenter of 20th-century Chinese history could preserve such an inviolate armor against political quakes and questionings. For Hui was born in Manchuria in 1947, the year of Mao Tse-tung's Long March, and her family emigrated to Hong Kong in the same year.

She grew up and was educated in the British crown colony, graduating from Hong Kong University in 1972 with a master's degree in English and Comparative Literature. After two years in England at the London Film School, she returned to Hong Kong to work as assistant to King Hu. "I only worked in his office for three months," she says, but I've always greatly admired his films."

In the mid-Seventies, Hui directed a fistful of dramas and documentaries for TV. One of the dramas, made as an episode in a TV film series *helmed* by several top Hong Kong directors and titled *Below the Lion Rock*, was her first brush with the Vietnam subject: *Boy from Vietnam*. She quickly followed this with two other *Lion Rock* dramas: *The Roe*, the story of an opium smoker who becomes pregnant; and *The Bridge*, about a foreign reporter getting mixed up in the local populace's struggle to preserve a footpath, and then being expelled from Hong Kong for his involvement in their demonstrations the mechanism of *Boat People's* reporter in embryo.

It was Hui's first two feature films that propelled her into the heady jet streams of the film festival circuit. *The Secret* was a boldly fractured thriller about a murder investigation in which Hui's mercurial cutting, vivid color sense, and ability to tell a story with a beginning, middle, and end – but *definitely* not in that order – invoked comparisons with Nicolas Roeg. *The Spooky Bunch* followed, a dazzling tale of ghosts invading a Chinese Opera troupe. It was both giddily funny (where else have you met a ghost called Catshit?) and so dynamic in its cutting that it makes *Poltergeist* seem as stately as an Ibsen play.

One snag with *Boat People* is that Hui, treating a subject with huge international political reverberations, has here opted for a style more generalized and linear, and less individualistic, than *The Secret* or *The Spooky Bunch*.

"I'm not very satisfied with the style of the film," she admits. "I didn't find a way of shooting it that was wholly appropriate. Perhaps it was because the subject matter is so strong, the script and dialogue so carefully written, that I couldn't use an obtrusive visual style. It imposes its own shots. I found I had to be very very fast in coming to the narrative point, but very slow in the shots. Actually I shot a lot of coverage, but sometimes I just let the whole scene play when we came to the editing. And when we looked at it, it was much better that way.

"When I was shooting, I was constantly frustrated because I could not find an overall style, which I think is a good concept. When I was shooting *The Secret*, I was feeling that although I was very inadequate – it was my first feature film – there was a style there that said what the subject matter said. The fragmentation of *The Secret* is a statement in itself. But in *Boat People* the style does not make a statement. It's just a plain narrative. But I still can't think of better ways to shoot it."

● *Boat People* is inevitably a movie which will rattle all the old questions about "What is truth?" In the background details of the film, Hui admits, there are one or two pressure-of-budget shortcuts and even one outright howler.

"We discovered that the death of the Japanese reporter could never have happened the way we showed it. He's running to join the refugee boat, which the girl – the daughter of the family – is already on, and he's carrying the can of diesel oil that each refugee had to bring to help pay for the journey, which was a standard practice. The police are firing at him from behind, and the diesel fuel ignites and explodes, burning

him to death. Well, later, people came up to me after the screening and said, 'But diesel oil isn't flammable like that!' Sometimes there are things you find out too late."

Eagle-eyed viewers may also note, from their design, that the supposedly American land mines being dug up in the New Economic Zone are actually Chinese.

But these are vagrant hiccups, not major mishaps. And they are balanced by some vivid and horrific details that Hui insists are well documented: the "chicken farm," an execution ground where firing-squad victims are plucked clean by scavengers; and the scene in which the family's prostitute mother kills herself from shame by piercing her throat with a meat hook.

The most ferocious flak Ann Hui will probably receive when *Boat People* is screened across the world is for her uncompromising espousal of the Chinese (as opposed to the Soviet) attitude to Vietnam. Hui answers vigorously: "I have never thought of the film as representing the Chinese point of view. Even if I had thought it, I would still have shot the story the same way, because that is how I see it. If I believe that what is said is not distorting the truth, then I do not feel it is morally wrong. Maybe in the future, when we have the film distributed, I will have to add a 'flip-cut' saying that the events depicted are based on word of mouth from refugees. Then if there is any official statement against the film, it might be better.

"But it's *not* a political film. I always believe that it isn't the system that matters in a country but the people who run it. It's a more optimistic way to see things and, I believe, a more realistic one. The film is set in 1978, which means that the situation we're showing could have changed even now. I remember reading in *The Far East Economic Review* in 1979 a speech by Pham Van Dong to his people, saying that he finds the economy unbearable and that the state of corruption must be revised. And so by admitting it, he means it might change.

"So I'm not damning the country forever. It's just that I am trying to explain this particular phenomenon of the boat people and their fleeing from the country, and to make people understand why they flee. And that has the immediate effect of making the Hong Kong people much more sympathetic. So it's a positive film rather than a negative. Negative is the very last thing I want."

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Any filmgoer still unconvinced that Ann Hui isn't hopping on the nearest careerist bandwagon by embracing Chinese ideological dogma should consider the risks she did take in making the film with Chinese cooperation. She confided to me: "I might get shot for this, but I'll say it. In Hong Kong there is a society called the Society of Freedom. And every film worker, including technicians and especially directors and actors, has to join this society for a minimal fee of 30 Hong Kong dollars a year. If you do not enroll as a member, your name cannot appear on the credits of your movie.

"The Society of Freedom is really a political association, because you have to subscribe to the politics of Taiwan – of anti-Communist China. And you are not permitted by the Society to go to China to shoot a film, not even an anti-Communist or a non-political film. If you do, you are faced with the prospect that not only will Taiwan not buy your movie but that they also won't buy *any* of your following movies.

"But we went anyway. I tried to keep *Boat People* a secret before the shoot, and it created a hell of a lot of trouble for me and my crew. We all have to continue working in the Hong Kong industry. Some directors backed away from *Boat People*, but I didn't, because I felt that it was a film I simply must make, whatever the personal cost. Otherwise I would not be able to develop as a filmmaker."

With the billion seats of Mainland China already pre-sold, and America on the way, chances are good to superabundant that Ann Hui will develop into a force in cinema, Occidental as well as Oriental.