

Thursday, November 10, 2016

Nathanael Hood on *The Beekeeper and His Son* (2016) DOC NYC 2016



Diedie Weng's *The Beekeeper and His Son* is a new documentary—so new, in fact, that at the time of my writing this review it doesn't have an IMDb page yet—that provides a snapshot of a family bracing itself for an impact that never quite arrives. After a year of living and working in the city, Maofu returns to his family's rural village in Northern China. His father Laoyu is a beekeeper who for decades has eked out a modest living tending to his hives. Maofu wants Laoyu to turn his beekeeping into a modern business. Laoyu just wants Maofu to carry on the family tradition and become a beekeeper. So we have the old dilemma of an unstoppable force meeting an unmovable object. Both men deal with their problems and frustrations by ignoring them. Laoyu berates his wife and loses himself to his work, bemoaning his hives taken over by moth larvae. Maofu drifts all over the countryside, listening to chintzy radio ballads about love and staring into space. Maofu is particularly fascinating: in him we get a glimpse of a generation of young Chinese men set adrift in a society with too few opportunities and, importantly, too few women.

One sees in both men echoes of the struggle between traditionalism and modernity—in other words, perfect fodder for commentators eager to exploit their lives as props for political arguments. But what struck me most about *The Beekeeper and His Son* was Weng's sense of time and place. Weng replicates the rhythms of peasant life without relying on calculated tedium. There's something romantic about how old Red Guard posters have become a kind of extension of pastoral Chinese living; a faded portrait of Mao Zedong seems as natural as a wall stained black by eons of kitchen smoke. Despite the ingraining of cell phones and motorcycles into their lives, there's something achingly eternal about how they tend their bees, clean out their pig-pen, and make noodles by hand.

Sadly, I expect *The Beekeeper and His Son* to get hijacked by well-meaning yet misguided critics. The film watches in silence as Laoyu yells at his wife and beats his

animals. In many parts of the Western world, his actions could be classified as abuse. I just hope that these critics take a moment to appreciate the world Weng was trying to capture and the lessons they bear.