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*Summary: Lina Wang's directorial debut has been described as "a poem to her hometown, portraying a Muslim farm boy's relationship with his deaf-mute mother, his friendship with a girl, and his parting from them". A First Farewell (October 2018) is a moving story about a school boy from a family of goat herders in Northwest China's Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region. The elementary school boy, Isa, leads a carefree life but must say a number of sudden good-byes. The first farewell is to his beloved mother who, his father has decided to send to a care facility because she is deaf; and the other good-bye is to his schoolmate and good friend Kalbinur. Because Kalbinur has been getting bad grades, her parents have decided to send her away to a faraway school. A First Farewell became one of the first films to be released in China in August last year following the reopening of movie theatres after being shut down due to COVID-19. The film was a surprise box-office success as many film critics did not expect an ethnic minority theme-based film to catch the attention of the Chinese movie-goers. The "Xinjiang Film," as it is referred to in the Chinese mainstream media, has already won several national and international awards/nominations, including the international jury best honour award by Generation Kplus sidebar of children's films at the 69th Berlin International Film Festival, the Asian Future Best Film award at the Tokyo film festival, China's prestigious Golden Rooster Award for Best Directorial Debut and the Firebird Award of the Young Cinema Competition (Chinese Language) at the 2019 Hong Kong International Film Festival.*

**Article title in Chinese:** 《第一次的离别》：在离别中学会成长 **Author:** 刘鹏波 LIU Pengbo

**Article source:** 中国作家<http://www.chinawriter.com.cn/n1/2020/0731/c419388-31805754.html>

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The ICS is an interdisciplinary research institution, which has a leadership role in the promotion of Chinese and East Asian Studies in India. ICS Translations aims to introduce views of the P R China scholars, analysts, and commentators coming from across disciplines.

## “A First Farewell: Learning to Grow in Parting”

As one of the first movies to release following ban on movie theatres more than six months ago, *A First Farewell* has had its share of “drama.” It’s a children’s movie with regional background in an ethnic minority autonomous province. Generally speaking, given its ethnic minority theme and being a children’s movie, one would have expected the movie will appeal to and attract only the minority nationalities fans as its primary audience. But surprisingly, *A First Farewell* accounted for nearly 30 percent of the film on the opening day of its release, with a single day box office returns exceeding 1.18 million RMB (nearly 1.26 crore Indian rupees-*tr.*). Indeed a remarkable achievement for a slow-paced art film.

I think there are two reasons why *A First Farewell* could perform so well at the box office: the first and obvious reason is that the Chinese movie goers have not seen a movie in a theatre for too long, and so as soon as movie theatres reopened, everyone just rushed to the theatres to see a movie, even if it was a niche art film. The other explanation is the excellent production of *A First Farewell* met the audience expectations and people started rushing to movie theatres. Of course, word-of-mouth too quietly spread among people.



At the award ceremony, Berlin Film Festival

*A First Farewell* really deserves high praise, a point well illustrated in the number of major national/international film festival awards the movie has won already. The award list goes as follows: Best new generation children film and Crystal Bear of the Generation Kplus section at Berlin; Asian Future best film award at Tokyo; best film director award at Hainan Island Film Festival...and the film was screened at the inaugural of the “Belt and Road” Film Week as part of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Shanghai International Film Festival last month, where the film director, Ms. Wang Lina, was given the “Media Film Personality” award. This was really a grand honour to a young and debut film maker.

*A First Farewell* has been set in the director Wang Lina’s hometown Shaya, in Xinjiang and tells the story of the growing up of Uyghur boy Isa and his classmate Kalibnur. Isa’s family situation is not good; his mother is now deaf after contracting meningitis and frequently wanders away from home. Isa must take care of his mother in his spare time after school and must prevent her from running into trouble.

Although better off than Isa's family situation, Kalibur's family too is living in poverty. Kalibnur's parents are worried for her low Mandarin proficiency while they are more troubled by her brother's poor performance in studies.



Image: Wang Lina  
Source: *Chinanews.com*

The film's narrative focuses on "farewell," connecting the everyday life and human emotions of the Uyghur people. Isa and Kalibnur are childhood playmates, facing the first true "parting" in their lives: Isa's father has decided to send his mother to a nursing home, while Isa's brother prepares to leave for college. This means Isa won't be seeing both his mother and brother for a long time. At the same time, Kalibnur's parents decide to leave for some other place in search of job and want to send Kalibnur to a Chinese school. Kalibnur is about to leave and part from Isa. The film reflects a lot of family and friendship feelings, showing each parting filled with different emotions.

The dual themes of a children's movie and an ethnic minority cinema, make *A First Farewell*

acquire a unique position in the world of Chinese cinema. Children's films focus on telling us stories about children and are considered an important type of films, many young directors prefer to use children's film theme for their debut movies. Compared with the adult world, children's world appears more pure and simple. But this does not at all mean making children movies is less challenging than that of adult movies; on the contrary, shooting children and animals is far more difficult, for it is a lot of hard work and patience to direct child actors to perform.

Wang Lina has her own way. She believes in filming children's scenes one must adjust to the level of a child and communicate with the child actor in his or her own way. During the shoot, Wang Lina would establish an intimate rapport with the child and let the child be herself instead of acting. "I don't ask them to act. I even downplay the form codes of starting and shutting down. I let them believe in the genuineness of everything that happens. I design, create a credible environment, a normal atmosphere and plan events in advance."



Image: Wang Lina  
Source: *asianmoviepulse.com*

In the film, there is a scene where Kalibnur is late for her school. Wang arranged in advance for her mother to adjust the alarm clock back and asked the mother to wake Kalibnur up much later. At the same time, Wang also asked the mother to teach Kalinbur's brother after Kalinbur has woken up. On reaching the school late, she cries inconsolably after the teacher's rebuke and scolding. Until the shooting was over, the child actor who played the role of Kalibnur was not told that her arriving late at the school was pre-planned.

In this way, Wang Lina was able to generate real emotions in her child actors. If you let the child actor 'act' in sad scenes, the effect may not be good; but if you let the child actor fall into the real situation of being late for the school, at that moment the child's sadness is real. The audience gets to watch the child's natural feelings of sadness, and in turn they really become touched and moved by the child's emotions. Just as Wang Lina said, "emotions should guide the actor's performance, and not the other way round. If you want an actor to cry in grief, you must arouse that emotion in the child. This non-interventional method of directing gives the film a naturalistic quality. Non-professional actors express their true real life feelings, rather than give a stereotyped performance. When it comes to children's films, how can we not mention films from Iran? Iranian films have set a high standard for the

children's films genre with many unique characteristics. Many Chinese film critics have called *A First Farewell* as the Chinese version of the legendary Iranian filmmaker Majid Majidi's "Little Shoes."

Comparing *A First Farewell* with the Iranian maestro is not without reasons. First similarity lies in the films' unique geographical phenology and local customs; secondly, *A First Farewell* also presents the children's world with an easy and tender perspective.

In the film, children are not only attached to their parents, but have been able to form effective communication with their parents, which is similar to the phenomenon observed in the Iranian children's films as well. With Iranian adult films not accessible everywhere, Iranian children's films have provided filmmakers to act as substitute for the fillip for the missing adult films. Sometimes we even find child actors in Iranian films coming across as "little adults" in their speech and behaviour.

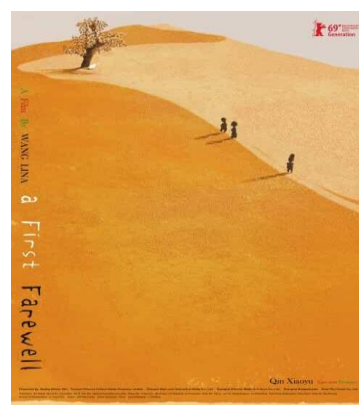


Image: Film poster  
Source: [imbd.com](http://imbd.com)

Focus of most such children's films is different from the normal realist Chinese adult films which highlight the everyday bitter life and arouse the audience sympathy in sensational way; on the other hand, the director of the children's film looks at people and things with a straight eye. Although life does have bitterness but people look at life more optimistically. In Chinese children's films, directors generally do not tend to pass the value judgement but neither do they limit themselves in blindly presenting a miserable life. Instead, they unravel the poetry of daily living and present the life realistically to the audience. This is what makes these movies different.

In recent years, more and more films about the ethnic minorities and their life-styles have been drawing attention. Movies with themes based on Tibetan, Hui, Mongolian and other ethnic minorities have not only made substantial breakthroughs in quantity, but also brought new surprises to Chinese cinema in terms of quality. Among these films, the Tibetan language films have been the most eye-catching ones. By Tibetan films is meant films showing the life of Tibetan people and made in Tibetan language. Tibetan language films are mainly made by Tibetan filmmakers belonging to and living in areas such as Tibet, Qinghai and Sichuan. Among prominent Tibetan language filmmakers in China include Wanma Caidan, Songtaijia, and Lahuajia etc.



Image: Isa and his elder brother Moosa  
Source: *hollywoodreporter.com*

Wang Lina, director of *A First Farewell* does not belong to any ethnic minority, but the movie is a vivid portrayal of all aspects of the life of Uyghur people. Therefore, the film qualifies to be considered as ethnic minority film. Xinjiang is a vast land and full of natural resources, but it is a pity no movie worth notice has ever been made in Xinjiang. Now, *A First Farewell* can do the honour. The film not only offers to the Chinese audiences the breathtaking landscape sceneries of the beautiful Xinjiang, it makes it possible for the outside world to know the remote and mysterious Xinjiang.

*A First Farewell* took three years in its making and is director Wang Lina's debut feature film. Before starting the venture, she spent almost an entire year in her hometown doing recce and working on the script. The script was then turned into a documentary film. *A First Farewell* has been based on the documentary. During the documentary film shooting, Wang Lina realized the potential of converting the documentary into a feature film based on people's emotions and real life logic. Therefore,



though it is a feature film, it is structured according to the logic of a documentary. The result is the film not only captures the texture and logic of life, it also portrays society like a steady stream of poetry. In Wang Lina's own words: "Film art can draw on any facts scattered over time, can make use of everything in life, organize the material provided by reality in time, and carve real time in images."

The film resembles a video-style documentary on nature, flowing freely like prose, but since it is movie in the genre of a social drama, it could not escape the need to weave a narrative through a plot. Such exercise was bound to bring its inherent contradictions: for example, the films' audience was faced with the dilemma whether what they were watching was a documentary or a feature film? If it is a documentary, its plot is too strong; but the plot is rather weak if it is to be treated as a feature film. Furthermore, the film suffers in clarity as the narrative keeps switching between Isa and Kalinbur, thus making the story look messy and scattered. Fortunately, the natural and powerful acting performances and the films' quite but poetic cinematography, add a lot more fillip to the film. Overall, *A First Farewell* is a good, promising film.

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## WANG, Lina (b. 1987-) A short profile



Image: 王丽娜 Wang Lina – *A First farewell* film director

*Wang Lina is a Chinese film-maker who was born and raised in a small village Shaya in Xinjiang. A First Farewell has been compared with Iranian films such as Buddha Collapsed Out of Shame (Hana Makhmalbaf, 2007), The Colour of Paradise (Majid Majidi, 1999) and Where is The Friends Home? (Abbas Kiarostami, 1990). Wang Lina herself is now being called Majid Majidi of China. She is a film studies graduate from the Communications University, Beijing. Among her favourite directors include Béla Tarr, Nuri Bilge Ceylan, Andrei Tarkovsky and Abbas Kiarostami.*

**More readings**

<https://letterboxd.com/film/a-first-farewell/>

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1194999.shtml>

<https://variety.com/2019/film/reviews/review-a-first-farewell-1203159125/>

<https://supamodu.com/2019/asia/lina-wang-a-first-farewell-2018/#>

<https://news.cgtn.com/news/2020-07-20/34-000-moviegoers-head-to-theaters-as-Chinese-cinemas-reopen-Sh3HY6Bqne/index.html>

**Series Editor:** Hemant Adlakha

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*The views expressed here are those of the original author and not necessarily of the translator or of the Institute of Chinese Studies*

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