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AFP News brief

Chinese student killing spree inspires Meryl Streep movie

by Emily Wilson

The 1991 shooting spree by a Chinese student at an American university provided the inspiration for a new film that explores how people in China and the US view each other.

The debut feature film from opera director Chen Zhi-zheng, "Dark Matter" is loosely based on the gun rampage of Lu Gang at the University of Iowa after he was passed over for an academic prize. Five people, all fellow students and academics, were left dead.

Chen, who was studying in New York at the time of the shootings, told AFP he remembers being fascinated at how the story was reported.

"All these Chinese newspapers were making apologies to Americans," he said at the recent San Francisco Asian American Film Festival.

"I found it ironic to see Chinese reacting by saying 'He's not Chinese' when of course he is, and saying how Chinese are the most polite people and would never kill you."

Chen said he had sought to capture the sense of cultural dislocation felt by many Chinese students when they arrive in the US, including himself.

"For me the first shocking revelation was nobody cared about you," he said. "You're basically on your own. Whereas the country I left you're always being governed by people. You're always being organized by institutions."

Both Americans and Chinese still have plenty to learn about each other, says Chen. "Our understanding of each other is so superficial," he said.

"The American understanding of China is tai chi, and medicine, and Chinese restaurants," he said. "And in China the understanding of America is equally shallow -- business corporations, McDonald's and all that."

Chen's film, which won an award at this year's Sundance Film Festival, tells the story of a cosmology student, Liu Xing (Liu Ye), who comes to an American university hoping to unravel the secrets of dark matter, the mysterious unseen substance that shapes the universe.

Joanna Silver (Meryl Streep) is a wealthy patron of the university who is fascinated by Chinese culture and befriends Liu, who swiftly comes into conflict with his physics professor (Aidan Quinn).

Streep's involvement was instrumental in getting the film made, Chen said, while Liu Ye was chosen for the lead role because he had never visited the US before arriving for shooting.

"Liu Ye's instance of taking in America for the first time is what is being revealed on the screen," he said. "So it's very fresh. What we captured on the camera is true to life."

Chen, an opera and stage director based in New York, who has staged several contemporary theater works based on Chinese classics, as well as operas such as "Cosi Fan Tutti," said he wanted "Dark Matter" to bring an operatic tragedy to a wide audience.

Chen said in his stage work he always had people from different

cultures work together, the way he did in "Dark Matter."

"It's only in opposition you see yourself clearly. So it's very interesting to take everyone out of their comfort zone to see themselves, to see what we are made of."

The producer of the movie is Janet Yang, who was executive producer of the groundbreaking "The Joy Luck Club."

She said the script for Chen's film resonated with her on many levels, not least because of the central metaphor of "dark matter."

"It makes up the majority of the universe, yet you can't see it," she said. "In China what is meaningful and mysterious is invisible, whereas in the West it's all about what's more dazzling."

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