

Chinese urbanites living the American dream on the outskirts of China's capital

Americaville, 2020 (Film)

Directed by Adam James Smith

Co-produced with Qi Zhang, Wang Qihan, Wei Guang, Song Ke, and Tang Yi

This captivating documentary is about the lived experiences of wealthy Chinese urbanites trying to escape increasingly uninhabitable Beijing due to air pollution and overcrowding. For those who are interested in China's rapid urbanization, this documentary is an intriguing and intimate exploration of how this group of people pursue happiness while grappling with some dire consequences of China's fervid urbanization.

Titled *Americaville* (美国故乡 *meiguo guxiang*, which literally means American home or American homeland), this documentary zooms in on a gated community situated in the mountains north of Beijing. Embracing the theme of the American West, this community is modeled on the Wyoming town of Jackson Hole in the United States, a place of rugged mountains and frontier culture. The real estate developer of this community constructs a romantic idea about the Wild West and aims to deliver the American dream to its several thousand residents. Replicas of famous American and European cities have started to emerge in China since the 2000s. They can be viewed as both a manifestation of the new power of choice and wealth that China is experiencing and an ongoing negotiation with its newfound place of wealth and influence in the world.

The film focuses on a segment of the Chinese population that is less scrutinized: the wealthy Chinese who are searching for ways to realize their ideas of happiness as well as express their new prestige in society. In *Americaville*, the rich find inspiration and comfort in Jackson Hole. The film follows the protagonist Liu Hua, who spends her working weekdays in her

apartment in Beijing and weekends in her country house in Jackson Hole. Liu Hua wants to escape the city's overcrowding and pollution problems and pursue her dreams of health, happiness, freedom, love and religious fulfillment. Attracted by the frontier spirit of the American West, she believes that Jackson Hole is the place where she can fulfill her dreams. It is her 'dream place' as she says in English, standing in front of a road sign named 'Grand Canyon'.

The recreation of the American West is palpably seen in the real estate developer's intentional design of, for example, setting up American bars and naming the streets and places after some well-known tourist attractions in Jackson Hole. While enjoying eating American food and watching cowboys dance, the residents also celebrate American holidays such as the Independence Day, Halloween and Christmas. And when necessary, artificial snow is provided to enhance the atmosphere in Jackson Hole. Around these festive occasions, Liu Hua, dressed in a polo shirt with the American flag, assiduously learns to clean her house by reading American home organizing manuals and make American food by studying American cookbooks in hopes of becoming a better housewife.

Touting that Jackson Hole provides more than just an environment with nice houses, clean air and beautiful scenery, the developer also boasts about the cultural aspect of his product. He tells that Jackson Hole embodies such American values as freedom, the country lifestyle, equality, and fraternity adding that most importantly, it is 'a place where your dreams can come true.' While clearly evoking the American frontier spirit, it also speaks to the changes happening in Chinese society in terms of people's wealth, choices and mobility, which in turn can have an impact on marriage and family life as seen in the case of Liu Hua, who struggles to come to terms with some of the choices she made for her marriage.

In the midst of this carefully created fantasy of the American West, the film director subtly captures the presence of the Chinese socialism in these residents' American dream. For example, the common practice of radio broadcasting in public places such as residential areas, villages and schools occurs in Jackson Hole too. Reminiscent of radio propaganda, the broadcaster wishes all the residents a good day in the pursuit of happiness and welcomes new visitors to embark on the journey of the 'magical American fantasy.' In a similar fashion, the film director skillfully lays bare the deepening class divide in society by interweaving images of the surveillance cameras, security guards, and workers maintaining the public green spaces

in Jackson Hole. It comes into sharp focus when a few motorcyclists are stopped at the entrance to Jackson Hole and complain that the road used to be accessible by all.

In juxtaposition with the story of Liu Hua, the audience also catches a glimpse of how the real estate agents try to move up the economic ladder by selling luxurious homes. In her pitch to sell a development project titled 'Beverly Hills,' an agent talks about Beverly Hills as a place of the wealthy in Los Angeles. She does not package and market happiness through embracing the American culture symbolized in food, holidays and the countryside. She is selling the notion that happiness can be purchased and measured by living in a replica of Beverly Hills in China, another expression of wealth and prestige.

The film takes a sudden turn when the fantasy world of Jackson Hole is rattled by a New York Times report about this Chinese replica, which sets off a spate of criticism from the Chinese public and media. The criticism is not so much targeted at the original article as the phenomenon of the Chinese replica and its residents. Nevertheless, unfazed by the domestic denunciation, the developer continues to expand his exploration of foreign cultures and experiences. In his new project, a Swiss style town is to be built in a big valley.

Towards the end of the film, the audience is confronted with a tearful Liu Hua merely saying that she may seem to have a successful life to others without really completing the sentence. It indicates that underneath the wealthy and glamorous appearance of her life is a relentless struggle for a happy life. *Americaville* has succeeded in diving beneath that surface and unveiling some of the personal struggles experienced by the well-to-do. As such, *Americaville* contributes to a more nuanced understanding of urban China by tracing the urbanites' movement to the countryside. It reverses the popular perspective on urban China where the viewpoint often pivots on the already disadvantageous and marginalized. Nonetheless, this is not to say that social stratification worsened by economic inequality is passed over in *Americaville*. On the contrary, it is laced into the main storyline in a skillful and subtle way that while it seems to be lurking in the background, it forms the ineluctable mirror image of the rich, and thus enhances our understanding of their distinct and yet interlinked life worlds.

Darcy Pan is a researcher in the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. She has done field research with labor activists and NGOs in South China.



© 2021 Darcy Pan