



DAYU HAITANG (BIG FISH AND BEGONIA) will be a future LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. Below is Kino Ken's review of that Chinese / South Korean feature animation.

14 of a possible 20 points

*****1/2 of a possible *******

China / South Korea 2016 color 105 minutes feature fantasy animation
Bi An Tian Studio / Enlight Pictures Co. Ltd. / Huoerguosi Coloroom Pictures Co. Ltd. / Studio Mir

Key: *indicates outstanding technical achievement or performance

(j) designates a juvenile performer

Points:

- 1 Direction: Xuan Liang, Chun Zhang**
- 0 Editing: Yiran Tu**
- 2 Cinematography: Xuan Liang**
- 2 Lighting: Amber Zhang**
- Visual Effects: Khandu Bidkar, Ashok Gunjal, Charles Chao-Hua Lee, Mengzhe Zhu**
- 1 Screenplay: Xuan Liang, Daniel Chuba (English-Language Version)**
- 2 Music: Kiyoshi Yoshida* Music Supervision: Masa Onoue**
- 1 Production Design: Chun Zhang**
- Set Design: Chun Zhang, Yifei Wang, Zhicheng Yu**
- Character Design: Chun Zhang, Zikai Guo, Zhicheng Zhao, Peng Wang**
- Backgrounds: Yifei Wang, Zhicheng Yu, Chun Zhang**
- 2 Sound Design: Kinson Tsang**
- Sound Mixing: Ernie Sheesley**
- 2 Voice Acting**

1 Creativity

14 total points

Voices Cast: Guanlin Ji (Chun, sixteen-year-old ocean underworld girl), Shangqing Su (Qiu, Chun's boyfriend from the ocean underworld), Timmy Xu (Kun, a narwhal / teen boy fisherman), Shulan Pan (Chun as old lady narrator), Yuanyuan Zhang (Feng), Jiu'er (Kun's little sister), Lifang Xue (Chun's father Shu), Jie Zhang (Chisong Zi), Xiaoyu Liu (Leizu), Zhongyang Baomu (Guomang), Yu Cheng (Tingmu), J. B. Blanc (Lingpo), Johnny Yong Bosch* (Qiu), Greg Chun (Houtu / Shu / Chisong Zi), Cam Clarke (Zhurong), Todd Haberkorn (Kun / Grandfather), Kyle Hebert (Neighbor), Kate Higgins (Tingmu's Granny / Red Horn Kid), Erika Ishii (Leizu / Tingmu's Mom), Guangtao Jiang (Lu Shen), Shih-Chieh King (Lingpo a.k.a. Ling Po), Yuri Lowenthal (Guomang / Tingmu / Lu Shen), Cassandra Lee Morris (Kun's little sister), Cindy Robinson (Shu Pozi / Pei), Stephanie Sheh (Chun / Tingmu's sister), Elizabeth Sung (Old Chun narrator), Fong Sung (Old Chun narrator), Deshen Wang (Pei), Goddess Wu (Feng)

After twelve years of intermittent production, **DAYU HAITANG** (**BIG FISH AND BEGONIA**) finally released to theaters in its homeland of China in 2016. Benefitting by an announcement from Beijing that the Communist government is backing a costly program to upgrade Chinese animation to Disney standards, **BIG FISH AND BEGONIA** emerged to set a quality benchmark for national successors. It's the first feature-length animation from China to attract international acclaim since **NEZHA CONQUERS THE DRAGON KING** of 1979.

The co-directing team of Xuan Liang and Chun Zhang resorted to conjuring a new set of Chinese myths for their dramatic fantasy rather than revive traditional ones which might be censored as regressions to primitive superstitions. Their pseudo-heroine, Chun, lives in an underworld supervised by guardians who manage weather and seasonal changes on the surface above. They control wind and wave there insofar as power-hungry human beings will allow. Supreme power, though, belongs solely to sky gods and goddesses, none being specified by name in this film.

A pair of supernatural gatekeepers rule over the dead. One is a male. He judges destinies of those mortals who demonstrated good conduct while alive. His female counterpart keeps lax discipline over malefactors who practiced evil. Such individuals become rats, periodically dispersed on missions by their mistress and otherwise kept stitched within a gigantic, rodent-faced sack.

When an Underworld entity gifted with environmental management talents reaches the age of sixteen, he or she receives a week-long pass to the Overworld. There, consequences of Underworld operations can be closely inspected.

Chun has just reached this milestone. The girl is cautioned by her pessimistic mother not to become involved at all with mankind. Predictably, daughter fails to heed maternal counsel.

Siphoned through a vortex connection with the earth into what looks like a decidedly Oriental sea, the voyager swims about in the form of a red dolphin, eyeballing with curiosity two terrestrials she spots traveling by boat in the same area. The duo consists of a teenage fisherman entertaining his younger sister with nature lore.

Suddenly a negligent wanderer gazes skyward and understands how little time remains until her wonderful week of freedom concludes. She must streamline cavortings if she intends to reach the critical vortex connecting this surface world and her own again before it closes down descent options. In her haste to reach that magical location, the cetacean flukes herself into a net. Frantic independent efforts at extrication fail.

Having returned in the meantime to shore, sibling natives note Chun's entrapment. Responding to proddings from the family shrimp as well as his own inclinations, Ocarina Boy plunges into the waves to effect an interspecies rescue, one which receives little assistance from a creature belatedly recognizing a supposedly hostile imminent danger.

Gradually cut free by the lad's knife, she bats him away with full force, sending her lifesaver within the suctioning scope of a whirlpool he optimistically discounted earlier. The result is a fluke drowning. One for the books.

Hearing laments from the surviving homo sapiens on a nearby rocky headland, Chun realizes she has rashly taken a life. How bizarre, to unexpectedly become an underage murderess while on a learning tour! Self-recrimination taints relief about getting back in timely fashion to her homeland.

Blood-guilt continues racking her as she attempts to resume normal existence with relatives. In search of some clue about cancelling the tragedy she initiated, Chun makes a private excursion to the most awesome oracle near her settlement, a hybrid of Song Dynasty celadon statue and Old Beijing stone guardian. This oracular leonine advisor, a sort of Aslan overseeing life and death, proposes she should return to him with her single remaining keepsake from the Overworld, the ocarina played by her undeserving victim.

Following this direction, she is soon joined by a woman charged with ferrying adventurers across a lake of mists to an imposing storehouse of souls awaiting rebirth. This place is run by a soul-keeper with a deep bass voice. He's inclined to pass away aeons making deals and playing games involving dead stock he oversees. For mere sacrifice of her beautiful face, he will guarantee Chun the restored vitality of lifeless flesh currently represented by a fist-size fish.

No deal. Chun has other plans for her face, thank you.

After cautioning the alternative bargain will be even more costly, Master of Good Souls offers a second exchange: half of Chun's life for a chance to restore heartbeats for Drowned Hero.

That one she accepts, bringing back an earthly piscine to her village. This is equivalent to letting an unhampered virus roam about the community freely. Predicted negative consequences begin to occur. Salty rains fall during what's supposed to be a dry season. Then winter arrives with snow at the wrong time. Residents suspect someone polluted Nature by trespassing against its laws.

Guess who?

Despite an outbreak of outlandishly untimely weather anomalies, Miss Chun persists in retaining her aquatic companion, whose life is now forever entwined with hers. This drives to distraction a likelier match, the youthfully mischievous Other called Qiu. He desperately wishes to ignite a romantic spark in his resurrection-obsessed neighbor.

To slant the odds more in his favor, the blonde, Teutonic-looking swain joins forces with his lady love. Together, they hatch a plan to hide Chun's maturing dolphin from the rest of their clan. This backfires, however, as Qiu tries converting it into a piscicide experiment. That also fails when Chun effects a death-defying intercession.

Later, the ever overinquisitive teen investigator opens up an enormous stone casket better left alone. Out issues a two-headed snake, one unsure of which

potential prey of three conveniently close targets to attack first. In order to defend girl and still miniature Kunfish, Qiu storms into battle against the serpent, receiving for his efforts what appears to be a fatal bite before vanquishing it. Only transfer of venom from his body to that of Chun's grandfather keeps him alive. This hastens the old man to a premature trip into the afterlife. Like his predeceased wife, reincarnated as a Phoenix, Qiu's benefactor continues to protect his daughter. In his case, by conversion into a begonia plant with unlimited growth potency.

Still unable to break free from magnetic femme fatale Chun, Qiu falls into the clutches of a Rat Mistress who seems to have designs of her own on him. Only an involuntary transfer of Fisher Boy's ocarina to this hag saves the unfortunate dauntless suitor from perpetual sewer residence. With human artefact secure in her possession, the singularly unattractive manager of rodents aspires to leave habitual dregs behind and ascend to aerial realms.

By no means out of the woods yet, the male protagonist of this tale pushes on ahead, eventually arriving at the residence of a sportive Master of Good Souls. There he's challenged to a mahjong contest which ends, like the chess match in *THE SEVENTH SEAL*, with complete disregard for fair play. Qiu is ultimately compelled to pledge away his very life in order to win back Chun's bartered one. No problem. For the smitten Romeo of the Otherworld truly loves Calamity Chun more than his own self.

Can these daredevils stymie a catastrophic flood, convince reluctant Kun to swim back to his native environment, and preserve those innocent Others whose existences are jeopardized by disrespectful interference with life's measured cycles?

This film will be a future LVCA dvd donation to the Ligonier Valley Library. So once it's available there you should check it out to see if your hunch about how China's metaphysical epic terminates is correct.

BIG FISH AND BEGONIA, sadly, has several frustrating defects. First, it employs a female protagonist who time and again is kept from death and dissolution only by extreme interdictions by male characters. Second, its plot line is absurdly complicated, insuring non-Orientals will be hard-pressed to follow its ropings through a labyrinth of confusing symbols and locations. Third, Kun lacks a strongly-defined personality. His romantic charm quotient is dead zero. Fourth, none of the secondary characters is properly defined. What

limitations do their powers have? Who are they accountable to? When not locked in contention with reckless juveniles what are their assigned tasks? Fifth, repeated salvations through impositions of supernatural beings makes for minimal audience empathy with leads. Only Qiu and the fisher boy's passenger resemble real people with understandable, relatable problems. Sixth, a number of minor complications never get duly addressed. Such as how Kun's sister responds to his new mate, whether or not the village ultimately accepts protective self-sacrifices as beneficial for them. Seventh, the final destiny of Qiu hardly seems sufficient reward for total selflessness. Eighth, the title plant in its original Chinese is identified as flowering crab-apple, not begonia. How does that hit you?

On the other side of the fence, **BIG FISH AND BEGONIA**'s music score is vigorous and enticingly mysterious. Even spiritually moving. It includes some gorgeous vocals.

Character designs are highly individual, as are voicings of various cast members. Sounds and speech receive optimal attention and both are free from mixing misjudgments or improper recording volumes. Lighting is optimally metered. Xuan Liang's cinematography displays plenty of range and versatility in camera angles. Closeups are especially well executed.

In spite of an underwhelming, overly abstract screenplay and occasional unanchored backgrounds that seem to jumble together sky, earth, and sea, **BIG FISH AND BEGONIA** is on the whole a worthwhile viewing experience for adults. It contains some probably discardable nudity. Similarities to **THE LITTLE MERMAID**, **PONYO**, and **SPIRITED AWAY** may partly offset an abundance of references to less familiar Chinese classics.

The Shout! Factory dvd release of this 2016 copyrighted film includes a theatrical trailer. Also present are two music videos, the first of which on the menu is particularly arresting. One theatrical trailer, a fifteen-minute production outline featurette, and the original seven-minute 2004 flash animation from which this feature matured are also part of the package.