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February 27, 2024

Film Study of "一个都不能少"

"一个都不能少" (Not One Less) is a 1999 Chinese drama film directed by Zhang Yimou, that portrays the state of rural communities in China that face poverty and lacking resources. The story follows the experiences of a 13-year-old substitute teacher, Wei Minzhi, who is tasked with keeping her class intact while the regular teacher, Gao, is away attending to his sick mother. Gao Loashi instructs her to ensure that 'not one less' student remains. When her most rebellious student, Zhang Huike, suddenly leaves school to help support his family, Wei Minzhi embarks on a journey to bring him back, encountering various trials along the way. The movie highlights the avocation of education and the resilience of the human spirit. The initial scenery of the dilapidated schoolhouse, contrasted with the bustling city emphasizes Wei Minzhi's struggles throughout. It offers a poignant portrayal of the challenges faced by individuals living in rural China, compelled by the economic pressures that force young children to leave their schooling and seek work. Through Wei's determination, the film underscores the importance of education and the sacrifices made to pursue it.

The film's opening events shed light on the poverty prevalent in the village school, evident by the status of infrastructure and resources accessible to it. The portrayal of the nail in place of a clock and a shared living space for both teachers and students exemplifies the lack of

investment in educational infrastructure for rural areas. Foreigners and city-dwellers alike are often ignorant of these mountainous villages and their state of need. The remote areas are overshadowed by big cities like Beijing and Shanghai which produce the common 'standard' and ultimately limit the awareness of poorer communities. Unlike city dwellers, villagers lack access to basic supplies like chalk, a cherished item for educators such as Gao. With only enough money to buy one stick per school day, the school lacks any additional capital for the sake of the students. The broken chalk in the film signifies scarcity as a symbolic representation of the overall limited resources that rural communities face. It also highlights the challenges of educators and students in such environments, where even essential teaching tools are in short supply. It ultimately becomes a metaphor for the larger systemic issues that hinder access to quality education in such communities.

In response to scarcity, teachers must maximize available resources, as seen in Wei Minzhi's innovative teaching methods. Although she had only just graduated elementary school, and was obviously unfit to be a teacher, her young mind found ways to educate her students despite the hardships. Utilizing her vocal talents, she engages students in subjects requiring minimal materials such as music. Her resourcefulness reflects the adaptability required of communities to navigate and overcome challenging circumstances. Within rural communities, it is often believed that producing roads and infrastructure is the only way to alleviate poverty, but more accurately, it is providing education to villagers so that they can invent new forms of success. Wei is an example of this, as she was initially motivated by the promise of a paycheck. But while her journey as an educator develops, her teaching skills and growing dedication to her students rise above all else. With the departure of Zhang Huaike, she is intent on returning him to

the classroom, and the students display remarkable creativity in their efforts to do so. Wei Minzhi can utilize teaching methods by engaging her students in real-life scenarios. First, she demonstrates the value of money exchange by taking the students to their local factory for physical labour, followed by interactive exercises in mathematics and problem-solving. These lessons she undertakes are not entirely practical, but due to the school's poverty, she is forced to innovate new learning opportunities for her class. By the end of the film, she shows an unwavering commitment to her students and ensures they all may have the opportunity to learn.

Despite the overwhelming lack that they face, Wei Minzhi draws strength from the support of her fellow villagers and especially her students, who rally behind her in her efforts to retrieve their missing classmate. Their solidarity and collective action reflect the strength of communities standing together, in which they often rely on mutual assistance and cooperation to overcome adversity. Throughout the film, Wei Minzhi gradually develops a deeper understanding of her student's individual circumstances and demonstrates genuine care for their well-being, embodying the holistic values of such communities through her capacity for empathy and human connection. She displays these traits during her outsourcing attempts within the city, which finally connects her with the TV station's director. The TV station used her and Zhang Huaik'e's story as a special report to draw social attention to education in remote areas. The improvement of the Shuiquan Township's school and educational resources was only made possible by the fundraising efforts following the broadcast. There is a distinct moral applied to the story indicating empowerment as a necessary facet for developing communities. For the overall success and well-being of the village, the pursuit of education is at the forefront.

"Not One Less" is a touching and thought-provoking film that resonates with audiences through its empathetic nature, offering insight into the challenges faced by marginalized communities and the transformative power of education. It stands as a testament to the human capacity for resilience and the importance of solidarity in the face of adversity. Wei Minzhi demonstrates unwavering determination in her efforts to fulfill her duty as a substitute teacher and keep her class intact. Despite facing numerous obstacles and challenges, including a shortage of resources and the departure of one of her students, she remains resolute in her mission to ensure that not one student is lost from her class. Her story serves as a reminder that even in the face of adversity, education remains a vital tool for empowerment and self-improvement. It underscores the resilience of individuals like Wei Minzhi, who are committed to providing opportunities for their students despite the challenges they face.