

DORCHESTER FILM SOCIETY
2022/23 SEASON



MASTER CHENG

(Language: Finnish/Mandarin)

Director: Mika Kaurismäki, 2019. Running time: 114 minutes.
Presented by Dorchester Film Society, 19 September, 2022.

“*Master Cheng* is a delightful Finnish film set in Lapland. A sign outside ‘Sirkka’s Diner’ announces it’s ‘Sausage Tuesday’. Inside a handful of older inhabitants nurse beers or queue to have ladlefuls of sausage and mash slapped on their plates. In walks Cheng (Pak Hon Chu) and his young son, Niu Niu (Lucas Hsuan) like visitors from outer space. There’s the language barrier – no one recognises the name ‘Fongtron’ which seems to be all Cheng knows. But there’s also a cultural one. When kindly Sirkka (Anna-Maija Tuokko) gives Niu Niu food, the child pushes away the plate in disgust. The pair seem to have nowhere to go, but meekly follow Sirkka to modest accommodation she offers.

It turns out it’s always sausage day at Sirkka’s. The locals seem content enough, but things change when a busload of Chinese tourists arrives who turn up their noses at sausage and mash. Cheng steps in, buys noodles, chicken and a few spices and in no time the tourists are happily tucking in. The locals watch warily. Sirkka, meanwhile, counts the takings and invites Cheng to continue to cook.

There follows a series of charming scenes. Hardened old men are gradually won over by Cheng’s polite manners and become curious about his cuisine. Unknown to them, Cheng is a master chef, fleeing from problems in Shanghai. He sources fresh ingredients and, amazed to discover the local lake is pure and unpolluted, starts fishing. Next thing Romppainen (Kari Väänänen), lead local, is staring at lake-caught perch floating in a delicate broth. Is it safe to eat? His mate Vippula (Vesa-Matti Loiri) isn’t going to risk it: ‘A white heterosexual male wouldn’t eat that’. The camera lingers on Romppainen’s weathered face as he tastes his first mouthful. It lights up in rapture. There’s an echo of the scene in *Babette’s Feast* when sour Lutheran locals tentatively sip their first glass of superb vintage wine. And like *Babette’s Feast*, *Master Cheng* is about the profoundly transformative effect of good food created with love. It seems to have almost magical healing properties.

You could happily watch any number of scenes like this. There’s a lovely one where the local primary school teacher brings in a class, anxiously listing allergies and intolerances. Next thing we see the children transfixed in the

kitchen as delicious spices are fried and added to great vats of fragrant soup. The food itself looks fabulous and you could swear that you can smell it too.

The story tracks Cheng and Niu Niu's gradual integration into the community. Niu Niu is at first withdrawn, plaintively asking if they'll see his mother again and Cheng has a rigid side, angrily forbidding him to ride a bike. The expected transformation happens because cultural assimilation works both ways.

Romppainen and Vippula want to show Cheng their ways and introduce him to a sauna. Sirkka meanwhile persuades Cheng to attend a local tango class.

All of this takes place in the endless summer days of the Arctic Circle. Jai Mutikainen's cinematography is beautifully restrained, capturing long, soft twilights in a land where reindeer browse the forests. The sound too is quiet – sometimes just a remote bird or the unshowy music of a single instrument. An enchanting film.”

Jane Darcy, *The Reviews Hub*, 11th March, 2022.

“A widowed chef from Shanghai travels with his son to a tiny town in Finland in order to pay his debt to a Finnish friend. But when nobody seems to know the man he's looking for, Cheng (Pak Hon Chu) starts to help out in the kitchen of the failing local diner. His cooking soon wins over the grizzled locals, who hitherto regarded foreign food as a direct assault on their Finnish manhood. And his thoughtful, gentle personality captures the heart of diner owner Sirkka (Anna-Maija Tuokko).

“This is soupy, romantic slop from Mika Kaurismäki, the kind of photogenic sentimentality that tends to feature heavily on the menu of Lasse Hallström's films. And yet if it's cinematic comfort food you seek, there's something rather soothing about this tale of a sad stranger embraced by a community who unquestioningly welcome him as one of their own.”

Wendy Ide, *The Observer*, 13th March, 2022.

“Easy to watch and easy to like, *Master Cheng* isn't just about comfort food, it is comfort food, an inoffensive, scenically sumptuous, heart-warming food-based film with its heart and its menu in the right place.”

Jim Schembri, *jimschembri.com*, July 2nd, 2020.