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Brief History of a Family

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Brief History of a Family* (2024), directed by Jianjie Lin.

Keywords

China, One Child Policy

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Author Notes

John Lyden is the Department Chair and Blizek Professor of Religious Studies at University of Nebraska Omaha. He has been the Editor of the *Journal of Religion & Film* since 2011. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture*. He also co-edited, with Ken Derry, *The Myth Awakens: Canon Conservativism, and Fan Reception of Star Wars* (Wipf and Stock 2018).



Brief History of a Family (2024), dir. Jianjie Lin

JJ Lin's first feature film depicts an affluent Chinese family in which tensions sit just under the surface, fueled by cultural values and prejudices as well as a history of government policies with unintended consequences.

The Tu family have one child, Shuo, who is 16 years old and an academic disappointment to his father, a successful research biologist. One day, Shuo purposely throws a basketball at fellow classmate Wei, and injures him—but then invites him over to play videogames. His latent violence shows up not just in the violence of the games, but in his repressed manner, as he doesn't really seem to want to be friends with Wei. Wei is from a much less affluent family, as his mother is dead and his drunken and abusive father regularly beats him; he has experienced none of the benefits of the life that the Tu family has, such as tennis lessons and resort vacations. When Wei's father dies suddenly, however, he is offered the chance to join this family he envies, and maybe even to become part of it.

Wei is smarter and a better student than Shuo, and it quickly becomes apparent that his parents like Wei, and they become like the caring parents that he never had. Shuo is clearly threatened by this, and he fears being replaced by Wei, whose English skills are better and who has a better chance of going to college abroad. The one-child policy no longer exists in China, but when it still did, Shuo's mother had an abortion to avoid having a second child—and she still mourns this loss. She asks her husband if they can adopt Wei, to have another chance at a second child, and as he is also impressed by Wei's academic ability and seriousness in contrast to his own son, he agrees. But Shuo has not agreed to this arrangement, which precipitates the final crisis for the family, as they may still be beholden to the legacy of the one-child policy.

This film is an interesting investigation into Chinese culture and family life among those who have been successful in that nation, showing how even their world can be challenged. In some ways, it is shot like a thriller, full of repressed characterizations and tense music, as well as some striking cinematography (from DOP Zhang Jiahao, also his first feature film). I was reminded of the first part of Spielberg's *AI: Artificial Intelligence* (2001) in which the “real” boy is threatened by his robot “sibling” to the point that his parents must choose between them—and that film is shot in a stark style that has been viewed as homage to Stanley Kubrick, who was originally to helm that film. And like that film, this is more of a tragedy than a thriller, as the family is caught in an inescapable dynamic. I hope to see more from JJ Lin, who seems to have an almost Hitchcockian flair for this kind of story.