

LIFE



Still images featuring Li Xuejian as the lead actor in the films (from left) *Jiao Yulu*, *Yang Shanzhou* and the popular 1990 TV series *Ke Wang* (Yearning). PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

A role model for the ages

Whether it's the story of a modern-day photographer, an ancient warrior or the life of a Party hero, highly decorated actor Li Xuejian continues to promote Chinese culture and values through his on-screen performances, **Xu Fan** reports.

On March 8, the International Women's Day, in 1975, Li Xuejian, then serving as a soldier of the Chinese rocket force stationed in Southwest China's Yunnan province, had a special gift for his mother.

He sent a telegram, with the message containing merely one sentence, "Mom, I have just officially joined the Communist Party of China."

Nearly half a century on, Li, now widely regarded as one of the most influential stars of his era and the recipient of more than 30 acting awards, still clearly remembers most details of that day, ranging from how he took the Party admission oath in a shabby room to murmuring the uplifting song *The Internationale* with the track played on a small radio.

Wrapped up in a faded jacket with a badge of China's national flag, Li recently talked to China Daily in a hotel near his home in Huilongguan area in northern Beijing.

Wishing to breathe fresh air after his successful battle with nasopharynx cancer, Li moved to the area from downtown Beijing more than 10 years ago, when it was a much smaller community.

"Over recent decades, I prefer to wear badges symbolizing our country or the Party, which remind me to stick to my faith and always be a good man," says Li.

Born in 1954 in East China's Shandong province, in 1977 Li started work in the art troupe of People's Liberation Army Air Force. With his vivid incarnation of Lin Biao in the modern drama *Jiu Yi San Shi Jian* (The Sept 13 Incident) in 1980, Li won a Plum Performance Award, one of the country's highest stage show honors, earning him overnight popularity.

With the hit TV series *Ke Wang* (Yearning) in 1990, Li accumulated greater popularity, bagging the award for best supporting actor at the 11th Flying Apsaras Award and for best actor at the 9th China TV Golden Eagle Awards, both prestigious domestic honors in the television sector.

Aside from receiving critical acclaim for his portrayal of fictional characters, Li is also known for the biographical films *Jiao Yulu* and *Yang Shanzhou*, respectively based on the true stories of their titular roles — Jiao, the late Party secretary in Henan province's Lankao county, who led locals in the battle against famine and to improve the environment, and Yang, the former Party secretary of Baoshan in Yunnan province, who was devoted to the



Li Xuejian, an award-winning actor, talks to China Daily at a hotel near his home in northern Beijing. ZOU HONG / CHINA DAILY

cause of afforestation.

When asked which character from his decadeslong career is his favorite, Li says: "For me, every one of these roles are like my children."

"But I always teasingly say that a person may care more for a child if they are not as good-looking as the others, or they struggle with physical defects. Similarly, sometimes I care more about the roles that drew less attention."

Starring as a variety of characters, from factory workers to warlords, Li has looked to experience to help him bring to life the distinctive and different personalities.

For tales set in modern times, he has attempted to experience a similar life to the character he is set to play. For example, he followed renowned photographer He Yanguang to the front line of a battle against floods in Hubei province. The trip was preparation for playing the role of a photographer in director Li Shaohong's 1992 movie *Family Portrait*.

"I was so impressed with the photographers' devotion and dedication to journalism. They risked their lives in order to get a bit closer to their subjects during the disaster to take



Li plays the role of a snack chef in his first online series *To Be With You*. PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY

photos," recalls Li.

For the actor, to delve into roles for period costume dramas or historical movies, taking a trip to museums to admire the specific dynasty's paintings helps, as he believes those artistic works accurately showcase the charm and temperament of the ancient figures.

One of his latest ancient Chinese roles is in ethnic Mongolian director

Wuershan's epic *Fengshen Trilogy*, in which Li plays Ji Chang, a subsidiary region's ruler who becomes the victim of Shang Dynasty (c.16th century-11th century BC) tyrant King Zhou. Additionally, Li reveals that another new historical TV series casts him as Emperor Gaozu of the Tang Dynasty (618-907).

"China's film and TV industries have developed quickly, in tandem

with the country's economic development brought about by the country's reform and opening-up. At one time, foreign blockbusters were more popular than Chinese films, but now the situation is being reversed," says Li.

"I hope Chinese filmmakers and TV producers think more about how to attract a foreign audience," he says, adding that he believes tales featuring Chinese culture and history can expand to overseas markets.

Li himself enjoyed international attention earlier this year, with *Day is Done*, a 24-minute film in which he plays a grandfather, taking home the Silver Bear jury prize for Short Film at the 71st Berlin International Film Festival.

The jury statement from the Berlin festival says: "The intricately woven family dynamics and superb acting immerse us in a genuine moment in their lives ... (director) Zhang Dalei's rich cinematic language builds a sensitive family portrait that transcends the duration of the short film."

"When I heard the news of the award, I was quite surprised. The

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Li Xuejian, actor

movie was shot in just two days in May 2020. I feel so glad that we can spread China's culture and values through such an international award-winning film," says Li.

Despite being affected by the COVID-19 outbreak earlier last year, the diligent actor has still worked hard on multiple projects, with his more popular than Chinese films, including an airplane engineer in the anthology TV series *New Generation*, and a snack chef in *To Be With You*, which also marks Li's first online series.

Surprisingly, however, for an actor who has played so many roles, he still has one acting dream that is yet to be realized.

"If possible, I really hope I can play Nan Rendong (former chief scientist of the world's largest single-dish radio telescope)," says Li.

When Li was 11 years old, he moved to Guizhou province with his parents — where Nan devoted his life's work to research with the FAST, the Five-hundred-meter Aperture Spherical Radio Telescope — developing a deep emotional connection with the province.

As the interview draws to a close, the actor tries to hail a taxi for China Daily reporters, gently declining our plea to take a few more photos of him at home to increase the variety of images.

"My wife has set a *jiagui* (a principle specific for the family), requiring me to work as a high-profile actor but lead my personal life as a humble person," says the veteran actor, wearing a gentle smile.

"I believe that most of my awards are not for me, but for the characters I portray, who often have a noble spirit and make huge contributions for which they are respected as role models," he concludes.

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A walk through the *hutong* in search of vitamin D

Entering the subway at any station and emerging at the Yonghegong Lama Temple is like entering a time machine. The skyscrapers and malls are all gone and past the temple on crossing the street, one enters a lane, or what is more famously known as Wudaoying *hutong*.

The lane offers an insight into how Beijing must have looked a long time ago. It sure makes for a perfect postcard picture, but not one frozen in time. For these are not residences any-

more. And the doors are all open. Walk into one and you will find a Mexican restaurant. Just next door is a boutique selling souvenir T-shirts, beyond that, another sells all kinds of hats and, further still, you'll find a small cafe.

Though I had been to a restaurant there once, I still signed up for a guided tour of the place, thinking, perhaps, I will get to know about its history, things I had not bothered to check online.

The guide, an American tourist and myself were soon walking in and out of restaurants, checking the decor inside and scanning the menus. Most restaurants have three levels of seating, on the

The lane (Wudaoying *hutong*) offers an insight into how Beijing must have looked a long time ago. It sure makes for a perfect postcard picture, but not one frozen in time.

ground floor, the floor above and an open-air terrace.

A restaurant called Saffron, we found out, wasn't an Indian restaurant, as we had guessed, but a Spanish one. A little down the road, the American fell head over heels in love with some boutiques selling exquisite dresses. "You must bring your wife here if you're married. She'll love it," she told me. Neither of us bought anything there.

After trudging in and out of a few more restaurants, we settled for coffee at a rooftop cafe where we kept looking at what looked like an abandoned fur coat on the settee of an adjoining table, until it first moved and then mewed, much to

the consternation of the guests who had been sitting next to it all along.

Perhaps irked by the feline's propensity to bask in the sun, a leashed spaniel on a neighboring terrace kept barking endlessly, stopping momentarily when guests reached out to befriend it.

The coffee break also provided us a chance to discuss vaccinations and the plight of friends and relatives battling a deadlier strain of the novel coronavirus in India. The American wondered if travel would return to being normal anytime soon.

We had our moment in the sun, but soon it was time to return. On the way back to the subway, our guide pointed at a "vitamin restau-

rant." "How does it work?" I asked her. "One specifies the vitamin one is deficient in and they serve you food that's rich in that vitamin?"

In my mind I was hoping they had found a way of making vitamin D edible enough to take care of my joint pains. But the guide didn't answer, forcing me to repeat the query. She began checking her phone, perhaps looking up the restaurant's menu on some site or app. A moment later, she looked up from her phone and smiled. "Sorry, my bad! Not vitamin, that's a Vietnam restaurant."

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Second Thoughts