

BEIJING BICYCLE

DIRECTED BY WANG XIAOSHUAI

PRODUCED BY ARC LIGHT FILMS

STUDIO: COLUMBIA TRISTAR HOME ENTERTAINMENT

2001. DVD. COLOR. 113 MINUTES



One of a number of recent Chinese films with applications for the pre-collegiate classroom, Wang Xiaoshuai's *Beijing Bicycle* follows the intersecting stories of Guei, a naïve, taciturn young man who has recently arrived from the country, and his counterpart, Jian, a moody urban schoolboy from a blended family. Landing a job as a bicycle messenger, Guei is given the chance to earn his bicycle and glean a percentage of the delivery fees by meeting a certain delivery quota. The bicycle is stolen just as he is on the verge of attaining it. Facing termination from the company, Guei vows to recover his lost vehicle, a quixotic task that he pursues with dogged and ultimately self-destructive determination. His search for the bicycle and attempts to retrieve it constitute the central conflict in the film.

Eventually, the bicycle is discovered in the possession of Jian, who has purchased it from a secondhand shop. For Jian, the bicycle represents the possibility of romance with a pretty cyclist classmate, escape from the crowded back alley residence in which he shares a room with his stepsister, and acceptance by a group of middle class peers. While Jian appears shallow, some students may be at least partially sympathetic to his ultimately conflicting quests for friendship, for love, and for independence from his parents. Jian's acquisition of the funds from his father's stashed savings, while unfilial when measured against traditional Confucian values, also prompts

viewers to question the role of his father, who, torn by the conflicting needs of his son and step daughter, has broken a series of promises to Jian.



Guei on his first day of work.

Literature teachers will find substantial material for class discussions. Both protagonists are saddled with tragic flaws, and their colliding plot lines are accessible to high school students. The themes of family conflict, peer pressure, and social mobility are mainstays of the high school literary canon. Students who have read *The Great Gatsby*, for example, will recognize Jian's attempts at social climbing. Although the character of Guei is not as fully developed as that of Bernard Malamud's Roy Hobbs, those who have studied *The Natural* will find similarities between the two in their rural origins, the obsessive nature of their respective quests, and their professional dependence on one tool. For works with similarly doomed protagonists, teachers can point to Okonkwo of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, or Allie Fox of Paul Theroux's *Mosquito Coast*. Most of

Beijing Bicycle's main characters are drawn ambiguously enough to prompt contending student opinions of them. Guei's hapless character can be used to introduce the concept of the antihero. When Guei's efforts become self-destructive and Jian reveals himself to be hopelessly narcissistic, students are left to ponder an interesting struggle in which good and evil appear less than clearly delineated. The movie's denouement is likely to inspire considerable student debate.

Film classes might compare *Beijing Bicycle* to similar works while discussing the concept of artistic homage. Majid Majidi's *Children of Heaven* (1999) treats a shortage of an essential resource with a lighter touch in a story about two siblings who find it necessary to share a single pair of shoes. Fans of classic films may remember Vittorio De Sica's 1949 film *The Bicycle Thief*, in which a son watches his father's descent into thievery after his own means of transportation is stolen, jeopardizing his recently acquired



Jian riding his new bike.

. . . *Beijing Bicycle* has an edgy quality that students will find appealing.

job in postwar, economically-depressed Rome. Like the disputants in Vadim Perelman's *House of Sand and Fog* (2003, a film that most pre-collegiate students will not have seen due to its R rating), *Beijing Bicycle*'s protagonists have conflicting claims to a single, relatively humble object—an object that nonetheless has come to embody the individuals' dreams.

Beijing Bicycle highlights numerous issues for students to consider in social studies classes. While not exactly treating the underside of China's economic miracle, the film does examine the struggles of some of those caught in the middle. With China's "iron rice bowl" system long gone, Guei pedals through a city of possibilities, marveling at gleaming skyscrapers and high tech spas. But the film makes clear that not all Chinese have equal access to these wonders. As a messenger, Guei is a spectator and a subordinate cog in the machinery of capitalism. Early in the movie, his boss enthusiastically informs the new messenger recruits: "You are the carrier pigeons of today." A subplot involving a mysterious young neighbor woman as well as Guei's frustrating attempt to make a delivery to the correct "Mr. Zhang" may prompt students to question the identity of the individual in a contemporary urban setting. Although, as Geremie Barmé has suggested, Guei's role as a naïve bumpkin does not fit the reality of Chinese rural culture,¹ thus warned, students can be taught to interpret the film as a social critique rather than as an objective portrayal of contemporary China.

From Beijing to Soweto to America's inner cities, economic viability for those living in the margins often depends on affordable transportation. A proposal to eliminate certain bus routes recently drew hundreds of opponents to a public hearing in Indianapolis. Few US cities have adequate cycling lanes or effective mass transit

systems, and despite increasing awareness of the consequences of oil dependency, Americans continue to drive inefficient vehicles. As China's economic development continues, cities like Shanghai are moving to restrict cycle traffic to make way for automobiles, even as China's pollution continues to rise and its energy consumption is predicted to double in the next two decades. China's increased oil use is one factor contributing to the rise in oil prices that the US experienced in the spring of 2004. *Beijing Bicycle* provides a context in which teachers can introduce such issues.

Most secondary students in the west have limited experience with Chinese cinema. While it lacks the magical realism of the international hit *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and the slapstick acrobatics of popular Hong Kong martial arts films, *Beijing Bicycle* has an edgy quality that students will find appealing. Much of the cinematography is beautiful, and the film's depictions of youth culture are valuable snapshots. Juxtaposing film clips of successful and still-struggling urban Chinese is a good way to introduce a discussion on China's ongoing transformation.

Beijing Bicycle is rated PG. It contains several scenes of fighting and a brief scene of Guei's nude posterior (DVD scene 7, "Seeking Mr. Zhang"). ■

NOTE

1. Geremie Barmé. "Radio National Perspective." Text of Geremie Barmé's radio review of *Beijing Bicycle*, February 22, 2002. www.abc.net.au/rn/talks/perspective/stories/s488242.htm

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