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derscores one intractable social issue: adequate employment for all. In today's China, many young men and women wander around on the streets, idle, even selling themselves at any price. They may demolish buildings to earn forty or fifty *kuai* per day [about six dollars], or they may dig coal, putting their life in danger for about one hundred *kuai* per day [about twenty dollars]. What else can they do? Jia uses the Three Gorges Dam Project to illustrate how today, just as throughout Chinese history, people leave their villages and go to big cities to look for work. That is the fate of many Chinese.

But, even though life is tough, these ordinary people still hold on to their hope for a "Better Life Tomorrow." In this movie, we see them singing, playing cards, and dancing in any place they find, even the remaining parts of abandoned floors, roofs, or bridges. "A two-thousand-year-old city is demolished in two years," people sigh, but life moves on, regardless. There seems to be no way to solve the problems of working-class people in China today. The film offers little hope, but Jia's ultimate faith that the Chinese people endure is what propels his films.

Because of its rich social exposure, *Still Life* can be used for seminar or survey courses on Chinese history and culture at the college or upper level pre-collegiate level to deepen students' understanding of China. Students can be asked to project the future for characters like Han Sanming and to imagine other scenarios for China's transformation. They can also use the film to compare cultural perspectives and expectations, and to discuss issues of social justice, economics, the environment, and the human condition. ■

#### NOTES

1. See John Minford and Joseph S. M. Lau, eds. *Classical Chinese Literature: An Anthology of Translations*. Vol. 1, *From Antiquity to The Tang Dynasty* (New York and Hong Kong: Columbia University Press and The Chinese University Press, 2002), 732–733.

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## INDOCHINE

DIRECTED BY RÉGIS WARGNIER  
DISTRIBUTED BY SONY PICTURES  
DVD, 152 MINUTES, COLOR, 2000

Reviewed by Michael G. Vann



©1999 Columbia TriStar Home Video.

Despite commercial success and receiving the Academy Award for Best Foreign Film, Post-Colonial critics such as Panivong Norindr, Nicola Cooper, and Lily Chiu have strongly criticized Régis Wargnier's 1992 epic *Indochine* as neo-colonialist nostalgia.<sup>1</sup> The standard line, drawn from Edward Said's analysis of representations of "the Other," is that the film romanticizes the French colonial empire, glamorizes the lives of white colonials, and uses the indigenous Vietnamese and overseas Chinese population as mere props, as racial backdrops that add color to a white man's fantasy.<sup>2</sup> This review argues against the established academic interpretations of the film.<sup>3</sup>

Rather than a whitewash of the colonial encounter, *Indochine* lays bare the decadent excesses of the French colonial lifestyle in Việt Nam and shows how this luxury was predicated upon the brutal and violent exploitation of the non-white population. *Indochine* is full of scenes that show French colonialism at its worst, depicting the institutionalized use of physical discipline on the rubber plantation and on the railways, the sexual exploitation of Vietnamese women, the dire economic conditions under colonial rule (including famine and the spread of cholera), the use of torture by the secret police, the exploitation of impoverished peasants by labor "recruiters" in what looks like a slave market, and the decadent, hypocritical, and unsustainable life of leisure enjoyed by the white colonial population.

In the film, one sees the theoretical concept of "whiteness" illustrating the racist structure of colonialism, which, to paraphrase Frantz Fanon, ensured that if you were white you were rich and if you were rich you were white.<sup>4</sup> The film should thus be seen not as a celebration of empire—what Salman Rushdie in the Anglo-imperial context has characterized as a Raj Revival—but rather a document highlighting historical abuses of human rights, compromised government ethics, and violations of social justice.<sup>5</sup>

A tragic family drama lies at the heart of *Indochine*. While containing elements of an over-the-top soap opera, the narrative structure places the characters in situations that reveal crucial elements of the colonial encounter and interlaces them with critical historical moments in Franco-Vietnamese colonial history. The film opens with the adoption of an orphaned Vietnamese princess, Camille (Linh Dan Pham), by a white family friend, Madame Devries (Catherine Deneuve). Devries

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Eliane Devries and her father attend, as the only invited European guests, the Mandarin's "Day of Tranquility" festival. ©1999 Columbia TriStar Home Video.



Camille runs away in search of Jean-Baptiste. ©1999 Columbia TriStar Home Video.

alternately dresses in manly jodhpurs, khakis, and a pith helmet as she manages the family rubber plantation, and elegant evening gowns when she throws elaborate parties designed to recreate France in the tropics. Clearly, she enjoys the racial power the colonial setting gives her (power a woman in France would not have enjoyed). She orders her servants around, beats her disobedient "coolies," and displays a maternal attitude towards her Vietnamese acquaintances, while her decadent father amuses himself with his teenage concubine.

Eventually, a love triangle between Devries, Camille, and a young naval officer named Jean-Baptiste (Vincent Perez) tears this colonial fantasyland apart. When Devries uses her social connections to have Jean-Baptiste transferred to a distant outpost where he guards what one officer calls "a slave market," stocked with impoverished northern peasants looking for work on the plantations of the south, Camille runs away in search of her lover. What she finds along the way are the numerous ways French rule is making her compatriots suffer (forced labor, famine, high taxes, epidemic disease, and other ills are all directly linked to colonial rule). She befriends a poor peasant family who fled the *corvée* labor of the railways. They take her with them to the labor market. When a French officer brutally kills the family for protesting their separation,

Jean-Baptiste arrives on the scene and frees Camille. In a Fanonian moment of violence-as-colonial-liberation, she fires a pistol into the head of the murderous French officer. The last reel of the film depicts the flight of the lovers and



Camille experiences the suffering of her country people. ©1999 Columbia TriStar Home Video.



Jean-Baptiste saves Camille from the slave traders. ©1999 Columbia TriStar Home Video.

the way Camille becomes “the Red Princess,” a mythical nationalist, and later communist, hero.

*Indochine* is an extremely useful source for teaching a critical history of imperialism/colonialism in Southeast Asia. Showing both the dark side of the colonial system, as well as the seductive pleasures enjoyed by the French elite, the film would be an excellent addition to courses on the history of Việt Nam, Southeast Asia, and Colonialism. Despite its strengths, the film should not stand alone. It needs a solid historical introduction to contextualize the rather melodramatic narrative. When paired with critical readings on French rule in Southeast Asia, such as Tran Bu Binh’s *Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation*, students will be able to see the colonial period in Southeast Asia from multiple perspectives.<sup>6</sup> ■

#### NOTES

1. Nicola Cooper, *France in Indochina: Colonial Encounters* (Oxford: Berg, 2001), 203–218, and Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1996), 131–154, and Lilly V. Chiu, “Camille’s Breasts: The Evolution of the Fantasy of the Native in Régis Wargnier’s *Indochine*” in Kathryn Robinson and Jennifer Yee, eds. *France and Indochina: Cultural Representations* (New York: Lexington Books, 2005), 139–152.
2. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).
3. Eric T. Jennings, “Visions and Representations of French Empire,” *The Journal of Modern History* 77 (September, 2005), 701–721, is one of the few academic reviews to note that Wargnier’s film does provide a sharp and strong critique of French rule in Việt Nam.
4. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York, Grove Press, 2005), 40.
5. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (New York, Penguin, 1991), 91–92.
6. Tran Tu Binh, *The Red Earth: A Vietnamese Memoir of Life on a Colonial Rubber Plantation*, trans. John Spagens, Jr. (Ohio: Ohio University, Center for International Studies, Center for Southeast Asian Studies, 1985).

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## LOSERS AND WINNERS

DIRECTED BY ULRIKE FRANKE AND MICHAEL LOEKEN

DISTRIBUTED BY FIRST RUN/ICARUS FILMS

DVD, 96 MINUTES, COLOR, 2006

Reviewed by Jennifer Rudolph

**W**hat happens when the German efficiency and discipline that built the world’s most modern coking plant collides with the frontier industriousness of China and its hunger for modern industry? *Losers and Winners* vividly portrays such an encounter by documenting the issues, perceptions, and emotions surrounding the purchase of Germany’s Kaiserstuhl coking plant by a Chinese company, and the subsequent dismantling of the plant in preparation for its shipment and reassembly in China. By chronicling the eighteen-month dismantling process, the filmmakers expose the clash between the perspectives and cultures of the German breakdown crew and the Chinese managers and laborers who were sent to take the plant apart—piece by piece. It is a close-up view of the two sides of globalization.



Night view of the Kaiserstuhl coking plant. © 2006 filmproduktion loekenfranke.

The film captures the palpable tension between the Germans, literally watching their livelihoods being taken from them, and the Chinese, practically giddy with thoughts of furthering China’s modernization. One German worker bitterly comments that Kaiserstuhl is being moved to China to advance coke production for China’s steel industry, with additional plants to be built with Kaiserstuhl as a model. He laments that he knows what is happening, and that “we’d better watch out.” His fear of the repercussions of the shifting patterns of labor in the globalizing world is tangible.

On the other side, the Chinese workers proudly see their work in Germany as a symbol of an ascendant China with a glorious future. One of the Chinese managers, looking at a poster of two Mercedes Benz cars, captures the views of both sides when he explains that the old Mercedes is driving away from him and that the new one is driving toward him. After this job is done, he’ll get the car of his choice and drive into the fu-