

Wright's impact on Japan was so profound that thirty-two Wright-related terms appear in the Japanese architectural vocabulary.



Wright (seated, left) visited the Great Buddha in Kamakura, Japan in 1921 with members of his team. Image ©2007 Facets Multi-Media, Inc.

This DVD is an excellent resource because it combines early modern Western architecture familiar to most students with traditional Japanese cultural and architectural features that may be less well known. Viewing *Magnificent Obsession* in Western and/or Japanese art and architectural history classes, as well as in studio and design courses, would highlight meeting points between East and West. Instructors may refer to detailed information available on the companion Web site, www.magnificentobsession.org. Another related Web site, www.wrightinJapan.org, provides invaluable information on current preservation efforts, news, and other features related to Wright and Japan. Thanks to *Magnificent Obsession* and its related resources, even the most enthusiastic fans will learn something new about Frank Lloyd Wright and his passion for Japanese art and architecture. ■

NOTE

1. See Julia Meech, *Frank Lloyd Wright and the Art of Japan: The Architect's Other Passion* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001) and Kevin H. Nute, *Frank Lloyd Wright and Japan: The Role of Traditional Japanese Art and Architecture in the Work of Frank Lloyd Wright* (New York: Routledge, 2000), among other publications. See also *Frank Lloyd Wright & Japanese Art*, DVD written by Maia Rutman and directed by Kenneth Love (Kenneth A. Love International LLC, 1997).



DVD cover.
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STILL LIFE (*Sanxia haoren*)

DIRECTED BY JIA ZHANGKE
DISTRIBUTED BY NEW YORKER FILMS
DVD, 108 MINUTES, COLOR, 2006

Reviewed by Xurong Kong
and Sue Gronewold

In contrast to the so-called “Fifth Generation” filmmakers who used only 35mm cameras, Jia Zhangke, perhaps the most prominent of the “Sixth Generation,” prefers to use digital equipment, which seems less professional but also more convenient. This equipment is ideal to carry on Jia’s cinematic mission: to focus on the gritty life of the lower classes in China. Jia feels it regretful that China, with its rich continuous civilization, lacks detailed records on the history of its ordinary people. *Still Life* aims at reflecting this group’s life and work—in a China undergoing great change.

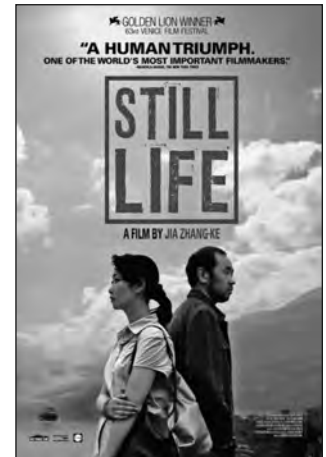
Like many people in modern societies with memories of an older world, or like China with its long history, these ordinary people face an old problem: how to balance traditions of the past with conditions of the present.

The movie takes place in Fengjie, Sichuan, a historical town, which appears on the back of 10 *kuai* Chinese bank notes and was depicted by the great Chinese poet Li Bai (701–762) in his poem “Early Departure from White Emperor Fortress”:

*At dawn I took leave of the white Emperor
In the middle of luminous clouds,
The thousand miles to Jiangling,
I have returned in a single day.
With the voices of gibbons on both banks
crying incessantly,
My frail boat had already passed
Ten thousand towering mountains.¹*

The Three Gorges Dam floodwaters, however, may cause this ancient town to disappear forever, as present threatens past. Given this backdrop, the film depicts two separate lives: a man, Han Sanming, and a woman, Shen Hong, both from far-off Shanxi, who go to this historic river town in search of their absent spouses.

Sixteen years earlier, Han, a poor villager, bought his wife. Soon after their marriage, police sent her back to her hometown. When Han belatedly tried to track her down using an address she left for him, he found her home already submerged. He decides to stay and keep looking for her, finding work in the only available occupation: dismantling the city before its final flooding. Thus the insistent sound of hammering and the



Poster for Still Life. ©2006 New Yorker Films.

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Shen Hong arrives in Fangjie in search of her husband.

forlorn images of half-destroyed buildings create a constant presence in the movie. When Han and his ex-wife finally meet, he is unable to answer her queries about why he waited so long to look for her, a metaphor for Han's powerlessness in the face of China's transformation, according to the director. By the end of the movie, Han Shanming is ready to return to Shanxi to work as a miner, the job that nearly killed him. This is the way he hopes to pay off her family debts so that she can be with him again. He also persuades other unemployed workers in Fangjie to go with him. "At least it's good money," they say, when he tells them of the risks.

At the same time, Shen Hong, played by another leading actress, is looking for her spouse. Her husband, Guo Bin, left her two years ago when he came to Fengjie to work for a factory. He has not visited her for two years, and she suspects that he has been leading the good life away from his family in a profitable line of work. She decides to travel to Fengjie to find him and to say goodbye. She then surprises both him and the audience with the news that she has found another partner.

As the English title *Still Life* suggests, this movie highlights still images to represent people's lives. To illustrate, it is divided into four parts: cigar, liquor, tea, and candy. To Jia Zhangke, these "four goods" symbolize happiness to common people. Regardless of China's fast growing GDP, many Chinese—especially those who live in remote places—are still poor. These four common items are accessible to them only during special occasions, such as New Year or birthday celebrations.

The encounter of past and present also appears in the film's music. A young man in the film, an avid fan of Hong Kong star Chow Yun-Fat, calls himself "Brother Little Horse"—a reference to the key role played by Chow in the 1986 movie *A Better Life Tomorrow*, directed by John Woo. In *Still Life*, Brother Little Horse sets up the theme song of "Shanghai Bund" as his cell phone's ring tone, a well-known 1990s Hong Kong TV action series in which Chow Yun-Fat plays the key role. In another scene, a bald man performs in front of all the other workers, singing a song from the 1982 Taiwan movie *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing?* We also hear two contemporary pop songs popularized online in 2005: "Two Butterflies" by Pang Long and "Mice Loves Rice" by Yang Chengang. Past and present intertwine throughout the film.

Looking to the past does not solve all problems, and the movie un-

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.

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



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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.¹ 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.² This review argues against the established academic interpretations of the film.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵

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