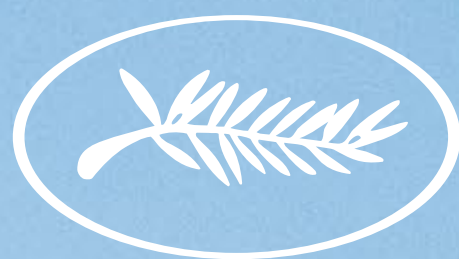


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OFFICIAL SELECTION
COMPETITION
FESTIVAL DE CANNES



ZHAO TAO

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

江湖儿女

LIAO FAN

A FILM BY
JIA ZHANG-KE



DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

While I was editing my earlier films UNKNOWN PLEASURES (2002) and STILL LIFE (2006), both of which starred Zhao Tao, I simplified the storylines by cutting some of her love scenes.

But when I went back to look at those deleted scenes, the two characters she'd played somehow blended together in my mind.

In my imagination, this woman was born and raised in my hometown, a coal-mining region in north-west China. She was named Qiaoqiao (“Qiao” for short) and fell in love with a jianghu type. Their love and torment would open the story. By 2006 they are both middle-aged and the man leaves for the Three Gorges area. She follows him there, but their relationship is broken. Everything that would happen from then on gave free rein to my imagination.

When I look back at the character Zhao Tao played in UNKNOWN PLEASURES, I see purity, simplicity and unconditional love. Yet when I look back at the STILL LIFE character, I see complexity, sadness and displays that camouflage true feelings. Time has changed the way she looks, but cinema records the way that time has shaped her. The deleted scenes inspired me to imagine what would have become of this woman – and the man she once loved – in the present day.

I borrowed the film’s Chinese title JIANGHU ERNÜ (“Sons and Daughters of the Jianghu”) from the last project of Fei Mu, the Chinese film master who was active in the 1930s and 1940s and who is best known for SPRING IN A SMALL TOWN (1948). The script which Fei Mu wrote was later filmed by Zhu Shilin; the film had the English title THE SHOW MUST GO ON. It’s a story set in a touring circus. My film has nothing to do with that story, but I loved the Chinese title. The Chinese word “Ernü” (“Sons and Daughters”) connotes men and women who dare to love and hate. On the other hand, “Jianghu” (literally “Rivers and lakes”, but it’s hard to capture the real meaning in English) conjures up a world of dramatic emotions, not to mention a world of real dangers. When you put the two words together, the title evokes people who dare to challenge the mainstream and people who live by the morality of kindness and enmity, love and hatred.

That Chinese title almost says it all. The couple in the film live on the margins of society. They survive by challenging the orthodox social order. I didn’t set out to defend them, rather to empathize with their predicament. It reminds me in some ways of the first decade of my career, when it was risky to make films expressing one’s true self and truths about society. So I threw myself into writing the script as if I were writing about my own emotional journeys: my lost youth and my fantasy about the future. To live, to love and to be free.

The opens in China at the outset of the 21st century and closes in 2018. I’ve always been interested in stories with a long time-span: time holds the secrets of life, stories and experiences.

The jianghu belongs to those who have no home. In the first part of the film, jianghu is the conflicts between rival underworld groups in Shanxi. It’s also the sense of crisis felt by the older generation in the face of the new generation. And it’s a story such as you might find in westerns, set in desolate landscapes, in cold weather, around old coal mines. The second part of the film is set in the Three Gorges area on the Yangtze River, where the dams under construction will cause entire towns to disappear. Our character Qiao is first deceived, then deceives others: she uses the survival skills she learnt in prison to negotiate the margins of this society. The final part returns us to Shanxi, where the male protagonist Bin sets off on a new journey precisely because he needs the jianghu – the places that will bring his inner drama to life. This is also where Qiao elects to stay, seeking her own kind of excitements.

There is one place in the film which Qiao never gets to, and that’s Xinjiang in China’s deep north-west. Maybe everyone has a place like that, a place they never reach, not because it’s too far away but because it’s so hard to begin a new life. We cannot break away from our emotional ties, from the loves, memories and routines which prevent us from flying high. These bonds are like the gravity which ties us to this planet and prevents us from going off into space. An emotional gravity fixes us in social relationships, and that makes it impossible to walk away freely. And when we do struggle to break free, the result reflects our human dignity.

I now have 48 years of life experiences, and I want to use them to tell a love story set in a contemporary China which has gone through epic and dramatic transformations. It makes me feel that I’ve lived that way myself – and that I still do.

Jia Zhang-Ke (April 2018)



Q&A WITH JIA ZHANG-KE

The structure of *ASH IS PUREST WHITE* echoes the time-frame of *MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART*, but the tone and characters are very different this time. Why did you decide to focus on characters from the *jianghu* underworld?

The mystique of the *jianghu* is a very important part of Chinese culture. Many underworld societies were formed in ancient China,

rooted in particular industries or regions. They were networks which transcended family relationships and local clan identities, providing support and a way of life for lower-class people. The most common spiritual symbol of *jianghu* culture is Lord Guan. He represents loyalty and righteousness, the core values of the *jianghu*. You can see how that works in the opening scene of the film: the character Jia refuses to acknowledge his debt to another guy, and Bin makes him confess the truth in front of the statue of Lord Guan, their spiritual totem.

After the communist victory in 1949, China's underworld societies gradually disappeared. The characters in ASH IS PUREST WHITE are not gangs in the old sense. They came into existence after the "reform and opening-up" movement of the late 1970s and inherited the violent legacy of the "Cultural Revolution" years. They learnt their morals and protocols from the Hong Kong gangster movies of the 1980s. They developed their own distinctive ways of handling relationships as a way of surviving and helping each other amid all the drastic social changes that China was going through.

The *jianghu* is a world of adventure and a world of unique emotions. I've always been interested in *jianghu* love stories in which the characters fear neither love nor hate. The story of this film spans the years between 2001 and 2018, years of enormous social upheaval. People's traditional values and the ways they live have changed beyond recognition in these years. And yet the *jianghu* clings to its own values and codes of conduct and functions in its own way. This seems ironic, but I find it curiously attractive.

Qiao and Bin didn't get married. As I see it, that's their fate – but also a symbol of their rebellion.

Have you drawn on factual sources again, as you did in A TOUCH OF SIN, or is this story entirely fictional?

It's fictional, but it's based on all kinds of *jianghu* rumors. Some of the details came from friends of mine.

The first section of the story incorporates some footage which you shot nearly twenty years ago. Was that old footage the starting point for the whole project?

I got my first digital video camera in 2001. I took it to Datong in Shanxi back then and shot tons of material. It was all completely hit-and-miss. I shot people I saw in factories, bus stations, on buses, in ballrooms, saunas, karaoke bars, all kinds of places. I kept on shooting such material right up to 2006, when I made STILL LIFE.

Recently, when I've gone back to look at that old material, I somehow found it more and more alien to me. I'd always assumed that changes in Chinese society are gradual, not something that happens overnight. So looking back at this old material was a shock, bringing home to me how suddenly things have changed. It's only when I look at those old videos that I remember how everything looked back then.

Before I wrote the script for ASH IS PUREST WHITE, I rough-cut some of that old footage into a ten-minute documentary short, which brought

back so many memories. Ash begins with a fragment shot on a public bus. I wanted to start the film that way because journeys are crucial to *jianghu* mythology. The stories about *jianghu* legends always make a point of the adventurous way they roam around.

Those faces on the bus remind me of a philosophical *jianghu* saying: "Wherever there are people, the *jianghu* exists". The name "*jianghu*" literally means "rivers and lakes", but in Chinese philosophy the term connotes "different people". The characters in the story have encountered more people than most of us do. So the film needed to begin with a group image.

You've returned to the Three Gorges for the middle part of the story, and it's an area which represents both China's progress and development and the loss of old communities and traditions. What keeps drawing you to the area?

Yes, it's become an important location in my films – both because it exemplifies all the drastic changes in modern China and because the actual landscape remains more or less the same. It still looks like a classical Chinese painting.

The Three Gorges are on the Yangtze River (in Chinese, the "Changjiang"), in an area where almost every county has its own pier on the river. Countless boats bring new people every day, and take others away. There's a constant sense of movement and chaos. The dam project in the area has forced a large number of people to relocate. On the one side, a huge national project; on the other, the break-ups of families and loved ones. The film's story opens in Datong, Shanxi Province, in the cold and arid north, and moves into the Three Gorges, in the warm and humid south-west. The enormous environmental differences open up a huge space for the film. From Shanxi all the way to her dream of a new life in Xinjiang in the far north-west, Qiao embarks on a long journey of exile. She travels across more than 7,700km of China in the course of the story.

The people living in the Three Gorges area have their own distinctive dialects, and linguistic diversity was another thing I wanted to pursue in the film. In the first part of the film, you hear dialogue in the Shanxi dialect. In the middle part, you hear the higher-pitched Chongqing dialect.

Remembering the monument which took off like a rocket in STILL LIFE, do you have an interest in UFOs? In this film, the guy from Karamay who wants to start "UFO tourism" in Xinjiang is one of your most intriguing characters.

In recent years I've spent much of my time in the town where I was born: Fenyang in Shanxi Province. I live in a village there. When night falls, there are always millions of stars in the sky and the moon seems particularly bright. The night sky there makes me think of outer space and other planets. To my surprise, I've found myself starting to wonder about aliens. Most of the time it's just a wild fantasy, but it does give you a new macro perspective on human life on earth.

The UFO guy in the film in a sense speaks for all of us when he goes on about his theories about visitors from space. What he expresses, indirectly, is the loneliness of humankind existing in this vast universe. He could be revealing the essence of our existence.

You are one of the most cinéophile of Chinese directors, and I wonder if you had any particular *jianghu* movies in mind while making this film?

From Zhang Che to John Woo and Johnnie To, many of the *jianghu* classics in Hong Kong cinema are old favorites of mine. When I was in junior high school I watched many of them in places where they showed imported videotapes. In *ASH IS PUREST WHITE* I used soundtrack from John Woo's *The Killer* in the karaoke bar scene and in the street gunfight scene. And I've used Sally Yeh's song *Qianzui Yisheng* ("Drunk for Life") in many of my films; for me, it captures the voice of *jianghu* love. There's also a short clip from Taylor Wong's *Tragic Hero* in the film.

You're working with a different cinematographer this time (Eric Gautier, known for his work with Olivier Assayas, Walter Salles and Leos Carax, amongst many others). Was the experience different from working with your regular cinematographer Yu Lik-Wai?

I've worked with Yu Lik-Wai since my debut feature *Xiao Wu* (PICKPOCKET), but when I went into pre-production for *ASH IS PUREST WHITE* he was busy preparing a film he wanted to direct himself and didn't have time to work on our project. We both came up with Eric Gautier as a potential replacement DoP in perfect sync. Yu speaks very good French, so he contacted Eric on my behalf and invited him to come to China to work on the film.

My first meeting with Eric was in Beijing. He and Olivier Assayas were in the middle of a collaboration at the time. I'd seen his exceptional talent in films by Assayas and Walter Salles, so I felt really honoured to have the chance to work with him.

The first difficulty Eric had to overcome was language, but he constantly surprised me on set by his familiarity with the script. He had every actor's lines off by heart. Even when an actor improvised and went off-script, he got it right away. So, as it turned out, language was not a problem. And we invariably agreed about characters and spaces in the film. A few days into the shoot I began to make some bold decisions about the scheduling of scenes. But he was never phased. I'm very glad that I found another cinematographer who could give me powerful support with the images.

Eric respected the footage I'd shot on my old DV camera. We decided to use five different cameras to make the film, so that the different image textures could help tell the story of the changing times. We used DV for the early scenes, and then later Digi-beta and HD video. We used actual film for the Three Gorges part. And for the last part of the story we tried the new REDWEAPON camera. Eric managed to unify all these different image sources, and the image-textures did bring us memories of different moments in the past.

You have four well-known directors in your cast: Diao Yinan, Zhang Yibai, Xu Zheng and Feng Xiaogang. Why did you cast filmmakers?

Yes, I invited all four of them to take supporting roles or appear in cameos. They've all appeared in films for other directors before; they all have acting chops! We make different kinds of film, but this film brought us together, facing the same cinematic issues and giving each other spiritual support along the way. Like brothers in the *jianghu*.

I've always thought of filmmaking as a risky career. The film's Chinese title *JIANGHU ERNÜ* means "Sons and Daughters of the *Jianghu*" – and in a sense that describes all of us who make films.

Q&A by Tony Rayns (April 2018)