

OFFICIAL SELECTION CANNES FILM FESTIVAL 2002 - IN COMPETITION

UNKNOWN



PLEASURES

A FILM BY JIA ZHANG-KE

THE YEAR 2001 IN CHINA

I don't think that anyone concerned with current events could remain indifferent to China in the year 2001. During that year, in the north of China, an unemployed factory worker exploded the plant residence in which he was living. Shortly afterwards, Beijing was elected host city of the 2008 Summer Olympics. In Southern China, a bank robber was arrested. This man had three mistresses. Before being executed, he received countless love letters from young students. On one hand, China successfully entered into the World Trade Organization. On the other hand, the incident of the collision of an American plane with a Chinese plane in Hainan revived Chinese nationalism. It's difficult to know which of these events marked people's thinking the most. As far as I'm concerned, all of them profoundly affected me. That year, reality was more theatrical than anything we could see at the movies. It even leaned toward surrealism. The entire population got worked up. This strange excitement gave me a worrisome feeling. The anger of society's inner layers was beginning to come out and show itself.

GENERATION "UNKNOWN PLEASURES"

In 1982, the moment when the young people in *PLATFORM* close their windows at night and huddle around to listen secretly to Western music, the young people of the "new new generation" in *UNKNOWN PLEASURES* have just been born. They are part of the birth control generation. They'll never have any brothers or sisters. Destiny has doomed them to a solitary existence. This generation also finds itself confronted with an existential crisis of individuality. Society doesn't know how to position itself in face of the individual experience. Culturally speaking, we haven't had the time to prepare ourselves to face this crisis. The system is already bringing this crisis toward another game almost as cruel. The enormous boost to the country's development exerts a disconcerting pressure on young people. Confronted with this, they find themselves completely powerless.

UNKNOWN PLEASURES

The English title of my film is the result of an observation I made about contemporary China. To avoid falling into hopelessness, people throw themselves into the frenzied search for pleasure. And luckily, they have time to waste their money! The Chinese title of my film, "Ren Xiaoyao" means "free of all constraints." This is taken from writings by Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi, in which he suggested enjoying life's pleasures and searching for absolute freedom. In 2001, a song with the same title was very successful among Chinese youth. It became one of the most requested karaoke hits.



Jia Zhang-Ke
Comments from
the writer-director

DO WHAT FEELS GOOD

“Dreams of Being a Butterfly” is one of the writings of Zhuangzi. One day, while sleeping in a garden, he dreamed he had become a butterfly and floated among the flowers. According to the philosopher, life should be a joyful process which should not be weighed down by reality ... In **UNKNOWN PLEASURES**, young people lack discipline. They don't have any goals for the future. They refuse all constraints. They run their own lives and act independently. But their spirit is not as free. Is Qiao Qiao's butterfly tattoo an emblem of revolt or a wound resulting from the price paid for freedom? If the slogan “Do What Feels Good” is today's young people's interpretation of Zhuangzi's writings, then it's also their sigh of relief at facing an illusive search for so-called freedom.

YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE PROVINCES

Like in **UNKNOWN PLEASURES**, the majority of China's young people live in medium-size cities or small communities, where reality is tough. Highways are under construction to unblock contact with the “outside.” Isolation is only now being broken. On one hand, telecommunications are rapidly advancing — satellite television and internet connections are now part of daily life. On the other hand, traditional industries are collapsing and the state economy is relying on new mechanisms. This is accentuating the gap between rich and poor, thus reinforcing the problem of unemployed workers, etc. ... What about the difficulties that these provincial young people are faced with? The big problem rests in the unequal development of the country. The rhythm has accelerated on the national level. The gap is increasing between regions. Cities like Beijing, Shanghai or Canton are very advanced, but still rest rare examples of modernity rendered possible by a strong concentration of state resources. Young people see their minimum needs are hardly insured. They're losing hope. The lifestyles presented by the media are the opposite of what they are living. Television doesn't stop showing them proof of this. What's troubling is that many of them are slowly losing confidence in their cultural identity. At the end of **UNKNOWN PLEASURES**, Bin Bin sees on television that Beijing is now easily accessible from his city thanks to the opening of a new highway. The whole country is strongly committed toward following the path of speedy development without worrying about those left behind in the process ... Walk among the streets of Datong, and you'll see the taciturn temperament of young people. The surface indifference that they show allows them to distinguish themselves from others. That's their only method of protecting themselves against outside aggression when they actually are very, very sensitive.



LIVING UNTIL 30 IS ENOUGH

Nineteen-year-old Xiao Ji says living until 30 would be enough for him. I don't believe he really feels that way, but that's his way of expressing his anxiety toward the future. In his city, people marry and settle down toward 30. At that point, days go by and all seem the same in respect to social order. No more surprises or hopes. Xiao Ji understands that. He would like to escape such a fate, but he doesn't know how to. That's why he says that living until 30 is enough for him. In fact, he's already searching for a way to escape from a routine existence. He'll choose delinquency as the only solution to his feelings of helplessness.

ADOLESCENT REBELS

No one person can represent an entire generation, but the character of Xiao Ji best presents a general phenomenon. Watching American films and having the newest gadgets is the way that young people keep up with the latest trends. That's also their way of distinguishing themselves from the generation before them. But fads pass because they must quickly confront life's rude constraints. In American cinema, one never gives in to the establishment and individual heroism is a component which seduces young people confronted by an identity crisis ... In China, the older generation wants to monopolize moral values. They don't trust young people. One could say that all Chinese adolescents are rebels. In *UNKNOWN PLEASURES*, the reason for the heavy family atmosphere is the older generation's lack of confidence in young people. I'm always surprised to see father-son relationships. There's so little enthusiasm in trying to understand one another. Dialogue is limited only because they share the same blood.

IN CONFLICT WITH HERSELF

There are many young women like Qiao Qiao in contemporary China. They present at the same time a great modernity without having departed from the inertia of tradition. They're in conflict with themselves. They are waiting for the day when they will finally feel free. Qiao Qiao lives in a world of diversion and loves to be on stage. Qiao Qiao stands out in a city like Datong, through her show business profession and through her way of acting and wearing makeup. She does what she wants with contempt to the norm. In reality, her eccentric appearance allows her to conceal her true, more conservative nature which she is embarrassed of. She cannot come to terms with her relationship with gangster boyfriend Qiao San because she cannot assume the role of the unfaithful mistress. In the bus stop scene after she has a violent confrontation with Qiao San, Qiao Qiao has taken off her wig. We see her true face for the first time.



MUTUAL ASSISTANCE

The relationship between Qiao Qiao and Xiao Ji is based on mutual assistance. Qiao Qiao leans on Xiao Ji to turn her back on the past, which she has difficulty letting go of. Xiao Ji leans on Qiao Qiao to prove to himself that his life has changed and to find confidence in himself that will allow him to face his destiny. Between them, it's probably not love with a capital L. But they share moments of great sentimental sincerity ... These young people torture themselves to help relieve their torments and awaken numb feelings. Qiao Qiao just can't come to terms with her past, which stops her both from looking toward the future and taking advantage of the present.

TWO DIFFERENT COUPLES

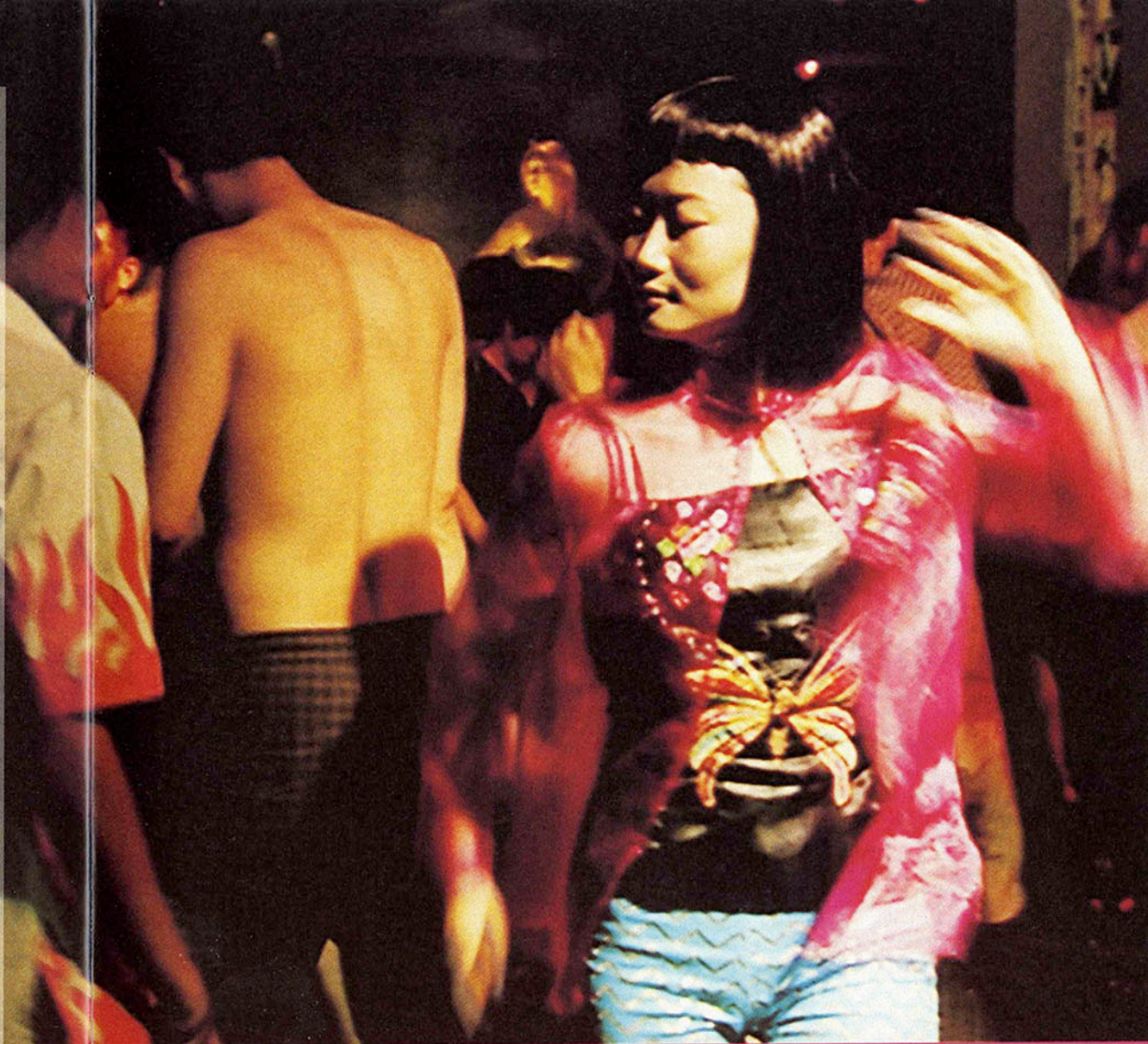
Yuan Yuan, Bin Bin's girlfriend, is different than Qiao Qiao. She has set objectives for herself. She sacrifices her present life for the construction of her future. She enthusiastically adheres to the rules of the game of our negotiating society. She doesn't put her feelings for Bin Bin first ... Bin Bin and Yuan Yuan are more reserved. They sit next to one another listening to karaoke songs. They feel their love will never survive the test of time. Bin Bin and Yuan Yuan are in despair over their love. Qiao Qiao and Xiao Ji try to love one another because they are in despair.

THE MONKEY KING

Sun Wukong, the Monkey King, is a mythological character known by everyone. His adventures are told in Wu Cheng Nen's JOURNEY TO THE WEST (originally written in 1550, still a popular Chinese opera). He's a monkey born out of stone. He has no father and mother. He lives as free as the wind. With great contempt for celestial order, he opposes the Emperor and creates trouble in the palace. His magical powers allow him to control the clouds and make leaps thousands of kilometers long. No one can overcome him, yet he won't escape the hand of Buddha, who holds him prisoner of the mountain, thus limiting his freedom. This ancient story reflects the fatalism of my film. Young people struggle desperately. They pull themselves out of difficult situations, but they always fall back into new problems because no one can escape the rules of the game. True freedom doesn't exist in this world.

EASY MONEY

In 2001, in my hometown province, I heard loudspeakers announcing the lottery. A voice which gave people the illusion of getting rich quick and maybe new hope to the most discouraged. Now, lottery announcements are heard all over China as if money solved everything. Will money be the only method of solving society's problems? People's lives are invaded by these countless promotional campaigns. How many of them will actually have the luck to share in these superficial riches?



LAST ROMANTIC EXPRESSION

In committing a crime, Xiao Ji and Bin Bin want to make a break with a life which gives them no hope at all. I feel like it's a psychic need of theirs. They are looking to find their own value by committing extreme acts. They want to leave their mark on a stagnating youth. Robbery allows them to bring a change to a frozen existence. That's why I say that violence is their last romantic expression.

SHOOTING ON DIGITAL VIDEO

UNKNOWN PLEASURES was shot in Datong, an industrial city in my native province of Shanxi. The name Datong means "Great Harmony" and designates an equitable society. However, it's just the opposite there. The situation is very troublesome. Walk among the city's buildings and you'll constantly be reminded of industry. It reeks of confusing and strange surrealism. I immediately thought about digital video. The slight color discrepancy of digital video corresponded to the tonality I wanted. I started shooting only three weeks after I had the idea of the film. The work was very improvisational and filming on digital video gave me lots of freedom in movement. With my digital beta camera, I had the impression of being a poet from ancient times who was observing the surrounding landscape while listening to the sound of his own inner music. Not to mention all the less technical hassles! I don't think that digital video will ever replace film. For directors, it's simply an additional choice offered to us.

