

FILM

Still Life

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Jia Zhang-ke's "Still Life" (China, 107 mins, colour) captures the Yangste river and a bridge, while people travel by boat from Fengie to Chong ming. On the boat, a magician from the Wuhan Magical Arts Troupe displays magic with euros and yuans. Han Sanming (Han Sanming) is travelling without any money, to even buy a ticket. The passengers are labourers and sailors. Fengie has been flooded by the recently constructed 'Three Gorges Dam', and the old town of 2000 years, has been pulled down and submerged. Han visits the Relocation Office, to obtain information on his separated wife, Missing Ma, of sixteen years, and their daughter. The official handling compensation for losses, informs that the area which was earlier under Quichiang, is now under Gongduang. The office computers are not working, and Han is told to come later.

Han finds shelter in a cheap boarding house, where he declines offers for women. TV programmes display cigarettes. On a boat deck, Han finds a senior sailor, Brother Ma (Wang Hong Wei), missing Ma's brother. The brother-in-law informs that his sister was working in down river Yichang. Han's daughter is supposed to be with her mother. Han walks the town, carrying a bag. Other sailors on deck are hostile to Han, but later they share wine. The Tang Dynasty Inn, where Han is staying, is full of bare bodied demolition workers, from Shanxi district. The inn owner lady conveys that Han's sister, was working on the Wangxu highway. Han has not seen his daughter for sixteen years, and he shows a group photo of his daughter in school, to the land lady. Han was a coal miner from Shanxi, and had paid 3000 Yuans for his wife. Some people relate that Han's wife has been taken away by the police. A mobile phone rings out the song : "Bless these good people", as the Yangste river surges through human lives.

Women work on oil rigs. Bankrupt factories were being closed and dismantled. Workers accuse the manager of Yungyang factory for inefficiency. Shen Hong (Zhao Tao), a nurse is searching for her foreman husband, Guo Bin, in Fengie. She has not seen her husband for two years. There is a chance meeting with Han on a boat. There is a sudden cut to a sixteen-year-old girl, Chunyiu from Shanxi, who stands on a road, and offers to work as a maid. The nurse speaks on telephone with the Fengie Antiquities Bureau, and traces a friend of her husband, at the Dongming excavations, of a 2200 years old Han dynasty tomb. The friend Wang informs that he has not met Guo, for over a year, and Guo was always busy. Wang accompanies Shen to the Demolition Authority headquarters. Workers fight with picks and shovels; and Shen bandages a worker. Wang brings Shen home, which is full of watches and clocks. They share a meal of fried fishes. Shen corrects her husband's phone number on her mobile phone. The excavation officials are having a party that evening on an open terrace, where couples are dancing. Shen and Wang drink wine. Taming the Yangste river was Chairman Mao's dream come true, and at night the bridge over the river is lit up.

Next day, Shen traces her husband Guo, who explains that his cell phone was switched off, as he was busy in meetings. Shen walks off, as the husband follows

in a car, couples dance on an incomplete bridge, as boulders along river banks appear on the foreground. Guo offers his hand to Shen, and the couple embrace and dance. Shen informs that she was in love with another man, who was waiting in Yichiang. She planned to take a boat to Shanghai in May 06, and wanted a divorce from Guo. Houses visible on the river bank are submerged in the floods.

Han listens to a musical pop performance. Workers enjoy and clap, Han is now working in the demolition tasks. The Inn at Fengie is served with notice for demolition. The landlady, with a disabled husband, would shortly move to Quandong. A fellow worker offers a make-shift office space to Han. Men in costume dresses and head crowns dance. Han discovers the body of his young friend, Min, in the concrete rubble. Wrapped in a blanket, Min's body is taken in a boat to mid-stream, while fires and cigarettes are lit before his photo. Han is now residing in a new block, below a road bridge, over a canal. Banks and school buildings are being demolished. On information from Brother-Ma, Han discovers his wife, Missing-Ma (Li Zhubin) in a hovel, on a river bank. The wife offers to prepare noodles, and conveys that their daughter was working in Donguam, way South. The wife has been working in a boat, belonging to another man, for food. When she was young, she had deserted her husband, as she did not know better. Han is keen on meeting his young daughter. Han shares wine and food, with the boatman, his wife's protector. He wants to take his wife along, and is asked to pay 20,000 yuans for loans, to his brother-in-law. Missing-Ma shows a photo of their daughter to Shen. The demand to pay up loan money and reclaim wife, continues. Missing-Ma gives a 'White Rabbit' toffee to Han, who shares it with her.

The stillness is broken by the sounds of demolition of buildings and big structures. Workers are in camaraderie, as they smoke, eat and drink together. Han's co-workers want to work in the coal mines, where pay is higher. But mining is dangerous, as workers get killed. Title cards at corners of the screen like 'Girl:Missing Ma', 'To Fengje', 'Liquor', 'Tea', and "Coffee" dissect and distance the narrative. Yi Lik Wai's camera preserves neo-realism in the magnified landscape and the ample vision of the inhabitants. In the metamorphosis of China to "modernization", demolition of structures, and displacement and disarray of human beings proceed simultaneously. Jia Zhang Ke maintains the parallel quest of the two protagonists for their spouses, as individual reconstructions, in the delicate fiction of the two dramas. From the stones and the river waters, surge the solitude and desolation. The plastic beauty of the film captures the confrontations between the ancient and modern worlds, between masculine and feminine. "Still Life" was screened at Osian's Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema (New Delhi, July 07). □□□