

## MOVIE

# A Feeling for Life

**Director Jia Zhangke depicts people's joys and sufferings with a distinctive documentary-like filmmaking style, hoping to reflect the real lives of ordinary people**

Last year, young Chinese film director Jia Zhangke's new film *Still Life* won the Golden Lion award at the 36th Venice Film Festival, one of the best showings for Chinese films in international film festivals in recent years.

*Still Life* was shot in Fengjie, a county in the Three Gorges area that is disappearing because of the grand hydropower project there. It tells the love stories of two separated couples who meet again in the town. A miner goes to the county to look for his wife, while a nurse, the other main character, goes there in search of her husband.

Born in 1970, Jia is a leading member of China's sixth generation of film directors, whose works, in Jia's words, are characteristic of observing society and people from a personal angle, using personal values and based on personal memories.

A graduate of the Department of Literature at the Beijing Film Academy, Jia began making films in 1995. His movies feature slow-paced long shots and focus on the destiny of ordinary people. Besides the prize-winning *Still Life*, his other works include *Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *The World and Dong*, most of which have won acclaim at renowned international film festivals.

In contrast to the lackluster attention to his work by the domestic audience, Jia has an established reputation overseas. *Cahier du Cinema*, an influential French film magazine, commented that *Xiao Wu*, Jia's first full-length film, got rid of the conventionality of traditional Chinese movies and heralded the movie as a symbol of the renaissance and energy of Chinese films. German film critic Ulrich Gregor gave him high praise as the light of hope of Asian films.

Recently, Jia sat down with Gao Yuan, our correspondent to discuss his feelings about creating *Still Life*. The following are excerpts of their talk:

**Beijing Review: What prompted you to make *Still Life*?**

**Jia Zhangke:** It was an accidental decision. My friend, painter Liu Xiaodong, was going to the Three Gorges to portray the migrant workers there. It was suggested that I go with him and make a documentary to record the course of his creation. So I went there. It was the first time that I had been in the Three Georges region. The life of the people there made a strong impression on me. Then, an idea rushed into my mind—to make a film telling the stories of these people.

**What impressed you so much?**

I think the people who live in the countryside of the Three Gorges area live difficult lives. You know, in my hometown in Shanxi, people in some places are also very poor, but even the poorest families have a small TV set, a clock, a calendar and things like that in their houses. But in the mountain area of Fengjie, some people's houses have

almost nothing but a shabby wooden cupboard, a stool and a simple stove. Some immigrants who have not settled down just live under some bridge spans. Looking at them, I feel that people can survive anywhere, just like grass.

**Do you feel that people in the Three Gorges area seem to be very different from people in other places?**

Yes, they are very different. For example, we Chinese people like saving face very much. That means even if I am very poor, I will not be a *tiao fu* (a person who carries things for others using a shoulder pole). But residents in the Three Gorges are different. They think that since they need money, they must earn it. I once ran into a boy who asked me whether I wanted to rest in a small inn or eat in a restaurant nearby. Actually, his family did not own an inn or run a restaurant—he just solicited customers for others to earn money. Like the boy, most immigrants in the Three Gorges are very

active in improving their own lives.

So, in *Still Life*, we tell two love stories—one is about a divorce and the other about a reunion of a couple. The characters in the film are not in a closed or passive state, but have a very active attitude toward life instead and make decisions about their own lives.

**Why did you choose *Still Life* as the name of the film?**

I felt that the land and the ordinary people who live there are too silent, and our so-called artists and society have given them too little attention. You know, some recent Chinese films are full of luxurious palace life, but the intense things in our real lives have not been reflected. It is not normal for artists to be silent about such a theme.

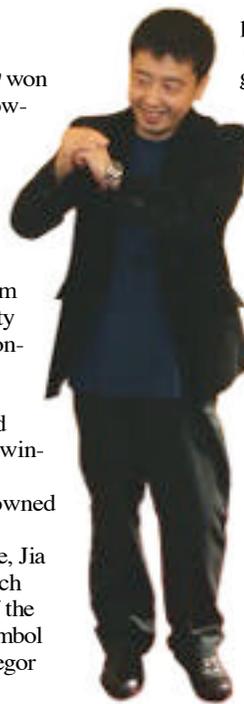
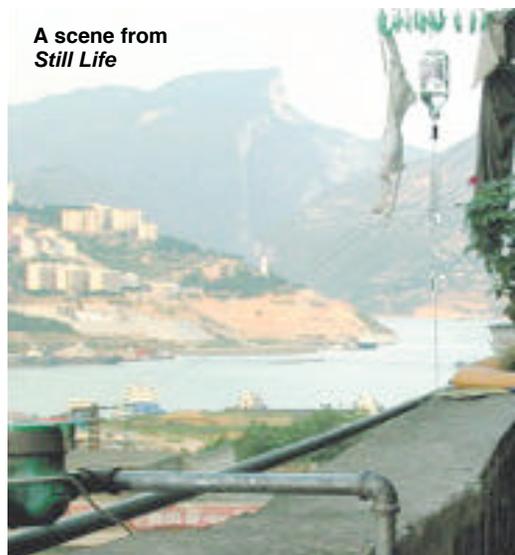
**Compared with Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and other directors of the fifth generation, what do you think is the biggest difference of the sixth generation of directors?**

In the works of the sixth generation of directors of China, the director of a film has become an ordinary person, and even a weak one, which I think is great progress. Our predecessors, including the fifth generation of directors, played a tough role, and the themes of their films conform to mainstream ideology very much.

They talk about reform, self-examination, drawing lessons from history, a renaissance and other heavy topics. But the works of the sixth generation are mostly individual reflections. Such a transfer embodies democracy and carries a strong modern sense. But just because of this, our works seem to be isolated from the general public.

**Is this why most audiences think the**

**A scene from *Still Life***



Jia Zhangke

### works of the sixth generation of directors are difficult to understand?

Current audiences not only say they cannot understand the works of the sixth generation of directors, but also think they cannot understand Zhang Yimou's commercial blockbuster *Hero*. That's because traditional Chinese films have been didactic, and most of the Chinese audience is used to being taught. So, if there is not this kind of teaching, people feel that they cannot understand the film.

But actually, people can be moved by a film not just because of its plot, but also by a scene or details. Films not only tell stories, but also create some kind of phenomenon. Maybe I fall asleep for an entire film but when I suddenly wake up I see people squatting and eating, which makes me recall folks in my hometown, and then I am moved. That is also a kind of enjoyment.

### What do films mean to you?

Films are a way that helps me to find freedom. In our lives there are many taboos—ideological, moral and human. We need films to touch on these prohibited things, which can bring about more freedom and space in people's lives. For example, the films in the 1980s on the theme of women and the current films about homosexuality have explored some space and make our society be tolerant of some forbidden phenomena.

### Since 2000, when you made *Platform*, you have begun to explore your own aesthetic style. Have you found it now?

No, and I think I will not find it through all my life. Japanese director Akira Kurosawa once said that he had always been looking for the beauty of films. I agree with him completely. Every director is trying to touch the form of films that he/she has imagined, but there will not be an end. You may approach it all the time, but there will be no conclusion. ■



## Stage Events

**January 28-31**

### The China tour of Russia's Little Birch Tree Dance Troupe

Discover the essence of Russian folk dance

**Poly Theater**

**Tickets 880/680/480/380/280/180/120 yuan**

**February 2-4**

### Spring Festival Gala

Watch the world's most famous classic ballets such as Carmen, L'Arlesienne and Pink Floyd Ballet performed by the National Ballet of China

**Tianqiao Theater**

**Tickets 880/680/580/380/280/180/80 yuan**

**February 12, 13, 23 and 24**

### Ballet with live accompaniment—Swan Lake

Performed by the Russian National Ballet Theater and accompanied by the Russian Symphony Orchestra

**Poly Theater**

**Tickets 1,280 (VIP)/880/580/380/280/180/80 yuan**

**February 14, 15 and 22**

### Ballet with live accompaniment—Sleeping Beauty

Performed by the Russian National Ballet Theater and accompanied by the Russian Symphony Orchestra

**Poly Theater**

**Tickets 1,280 (VIP)/880/580/380/280/180/80 yuan**

**February 16**

### Nutcracker with live accompaniment

Enjoy the classic Christmas ballet and one of the favorites of leading ballet troupes around the world. Performed by the Russian National Ballet Theater and accompanied by the Russian Symphony Orchestra

**Poly Theater**

**Tickets 1,280**

**(VIP)/880/580/380/280/180/80 yuan**

**February 18**

### Spring Festival Concert by the Russian Symphony Orchestra

**Poly Theater**

**Tickets 1,000/800/500/300/200/100/50 yuan**

**February 19**

### Ballet Don Quixote

Performed by the Russian National Ballet Theater and accompanied by the Russian Symphony Orchestra

**Poly Theater**

**Tickets 1,280**

**(VIP)/880/580/380/280/180/80 yuan**

**February 19-24**

### Cartoon for children—The Ugly Duckling

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## Art Event

### Photography Exhibition—My Bride and I

A young man arrived in Beijing two years ago, bringing with him a rosy dream. As he seeks a career in this bustling metropolis, he has increasingly found it a city full of contrasts—powerful tycoons and ordinary dwellers, expressways and overpasses and chronic traffic jams, and buildings under construction and those about to be torn down. As a result, he is often haunted by the illusion that he lives in a place between reality and a dream. What is he after? Can he fulfill his life's dreams and, in addition, meet the right girl here? See the world of this man through the camera lens at Qiu Zhen's solo photo exhibition.

**798 Photo Gallery**

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