

*Still Life*, Jia Zhangke

*Still Life*, directed by Jia Zhangke, is seemingly obsessed with asking the question: “Where are you from?”

The China one hears about from the characters in *Still Life* is vast, almost gargantuan in scope; it is a nation where wives, husbands, and daughters can be lost for years, regardless of technological advancement. A nation where entire streets and cities can be purposefully flooded and replaced by glittering bridges based on one man’s will. A nation full of towns you’ve never even heard of, a nation where two fellow countrymen can be speaking in dialects different enough to be impossible to understand. A nation where when you go down south to find your daughter, you find out she’s somewhere even more south. In the midst of destruction, loss, and relocation, Jia’s characters cling to their hometowns as someplace meaningful and grounding, even while they dislocate their bodies from place to place in order to search for work and family.

Despite the grand scale of the China discussed by the characters, the everyday life of the Chinese actually depicted by *Still Life* is the furthest thing from majestic. Instead, this China is at once mundane and imposing: decrepit buildings jut into the sky while surrounded by debris, huge gorges and rivers rush continuously in the background of transitional scenes, eight men live and eat together in one small room, rickety trucks traverse the disintegrating streets of Fengjie, nomadic laborers wander from destruction to destruction.

Pivotal to the film’s construction of China is its main character, Sanming. In a loose white tank-top, Sanming slouches silently through the beginning of the movie, setting him apart from the active, shirtless laborers with whom he lives and works. Sanming moves from town to town attempting to find his wife and daughter, but the most striking part of the movie comes in the long moments in which he remains still. In the background, however, there is always movement—the sound of people talking and eating, buildings being destroyed, machines revving, cars driving. How is the title of *Still Life* meant to be interpreted? Still life: Sanming is literally unmoving, quiet, silent. A still life force, attempting to survive while the world changes around him. “Present day society doesn’t suit us because we’re too nostalgic”— Sanming is motionless in both his reminiscence and adjustment, taking his time to observe the river and the modernizing world around him. Still life: In the background of this silence, life, in all its complicated forms, continues. Governments plan to destroy 2000 year-old cities, ancient dynasties are dug up in archeological digs, people are buried under bricks as the price of construction, and life continues. The river flows. Bridges light up. People try to find places and families in which to belong.

It can be easy to get caught up in Jia’s fascinations; the river, destruction, poverty, bricks, ruins, food, shirtless laborers, poor urban planning, bandaged heads, signs that say things like “Try Hard” and “Tear Down,” alien beings and ideas. One that stands out in particular is the intense focus on paper money, present from the very beginning of the film. Sanming does not even have the money needed to be hustled by a man who insists the future is in the American dollar and the European euro. He lives with a man who, emulating a man setting an American bill on fire to light his cigarette, lights pieces of paper on fire and later picks up the habit. The

laborers he lives with use their paper money to show the beauty of the hometowns that they miss and moved away from, while at the same time discussing the dangers and profits of mining and destruction labor. Sanming compares the three river gorges from the back of his paper bill with the real thing; he turns it around to see Mao Zedong. I was surprised at the inherent criticism of the Chinese government's approach to destroying the city of Fengjie and relocating its inhabitants and even more surprised at Jia's emphasis on the commercialism of the modernizing Chinese Communist Party.

Despite these preoccupations, however, *Still Life* remains a simple, understandable, and deeply felt story of a man and a woman in search of their respective families. Innovation and progress set against destruction and death is simply the background for their stories of reuniting and forgetting.