

## Love and Home: Metaphors in Still Life

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**Abstract:** “love” and “home” are two metaphors in Jia Zhangke's movie *Still Life* (also called *SanXia HaoRen*, *SanXia* means the Three Gorges Reservoir). The film, based on the context of the relocation of people in the Three Gorges Reservoir area, tells two stories of two commons, compelled to undergo ups and downs in the fierce torrent of a social transformation in China, trying hard to seek for love and home. The themes “love” and “home” spiritually mirror a certain era, thus *Still Life* narrates how hard it is to acquire “love” and “home” in that era from the perspective of people at the bottom in China.

### 1. Introduction

Jia Zhangke, a representative of the sixth generation of Chinese film directors, is highly acclaimed around the world. Gretel, a German film critic, praised Jia Zhangke as “the lightning bright light of hope for Asian films”. He commented that Jia’s films show the natural and real present and adopt a level-headed documentary style to reflect the reality of China. *Still Life* won the Golden Lion Award for Best Film in the 63rd Venice Film Festival and Jia Zhangke became the second Chinese director (after Zhang Yimou) to win the award. From his first film *Xiaoshan Goes Home* to the Trilogy (*Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*) and *Still Life* as well as the new movie *Ash Is Purest White* in 2018, we are enabled to see the painful pursuit of “love” and “home” from people at the bottom in China as well as their joys and sorrows under the background of drastic social change. Therefore, Jia makes the theme of “love” and “home” a metaphor that something valuable are sought-for but disappearing in this era.

### 2. Love: Persistence and Bitterness

The film *Still Life* unfolds stories that two persons from Shanxi Province, Han Sanming, a coal miner and Shen Hong, a nurse, go to the Three Gorges Reservoir area respectively to find their spouses who have lost contact with them for many years. Focusing on the search for love and home, the film provokes thoughts about life and world under the background of social transformation. Besides, the scenes in the raw of the film not only bring the viewers visual impact, but also intrigue us ideologically by highlighting the perseverance and fortitude of these “unimportant” common people in the course of love pursuing.

Sixteen years ago, Han Sanming, a coal miner in Shanxi Province, bought a wife named Ma Yaomei from Fengjie County, Chongqing Province with 3000 yuan. Later, because of the census, Ma Yaomei was freed by the public security unit from Shanxi and fled to her hometown, Chongqing. After sixteen years, Han Sanming plans to travel thousands of miles from Shanxi to Chongqing to find his wife and daughter. But the only clue he has is a note of a family address of his wife in Chongqing that he begged her to write 16 years ago. With this only hope, Han Sanming begins his search for “home”. On the way to destination, Han Sanming encounters a number of people -- the cunning driver, the bullying prestidigitator, the collusive local gangster and the innkeeper, the miserable brother Ma, the back-busting rural laborers and the laid-off worker disabled by work. On one hand, we admire Han Sanmming’s perseverance and fortitude, on the other hand, we are greatly galvanized by these negligible and helpless people. Meanwhile, the film mirrors the living actuality of these humble people from scenes of the dirty hotel, noisy crowd,

chaotic living surroundings and this isolated county in ruins as a whole. All of these indicate the miserable destiny of these nonentities for their insignificant social status.

Forced to make a living in search for his wife, Han Sanming, finds a job of housing demolition. The scene of building ruins provides a perfect backdrop for the increasingly arduous pursuit of love. Finally, Han Sanming and his wife, Ma Yaomei, meet after years of separation. Temporarily, there are some material obstacles hindering their future, but our sorrow for this mundane couple is alleviated by an aesthetic and lyric scene--in a dilapidated building, Han Sanming and Ma Yaomei share toffees intimately, while a distant building collapses before them. They stand so close and cling so tight to each other that I cannot help recalling words from Zhang Ailing's book, *Love In A Fallen City*, "The fall of Hong Kong fulfilled her wish for marriage, but in this elusive world, who knows how to figure out cause and the result? Maybe, her wish can be completed only when this big city is overturned."<sup>[1]</sup> Han Sanming and Ma Yaomei has gone through too much hardship of life for the moment of reunion, but, in this material world, to reconstitute their family, they have to take a long journey into the unknown.

Another story in the film is about Shen Hong, a nurse, who also goes to Fengjie county alone to look for her husband, Guo Bin, whom she has lost contact for more than two years. She cannot extricate herself in the painful pursuit of love which breaks her heart time after time. Then, Shen Hong finds her husband's friend Wang Dongming and asks him about Guo Bin's whereabouts. Directed to a factory where Guo used to work, Shen finds nothing but some articles for daily use Guo left. After a glance, Shen takes a packet of Yunwu tea. Then, the scene that Shen tastes the bitter tea in solitude and hopelessness foreshadows their marriage doomed to be fruitless. Heart-broken, Shen Hong deeply feels that she is taking a gamble to turn back Guo's heart. At last, this ramshackle marriage ends in divorce.

The two protagonists in the film are all persistent pursuers for love. Interestingly, for them, the director sets several interscenes of a little boy's singing, indicating their different perceptions for love. The little boy sings in one shot, when Han Sanming is on the boat, and the lyrics goes like this: "I love you so nice, same as the mice do with rice." So frank and plain it is, reflecting Han's philosophy about love. As one of social underclass, Han's notion of love stems from traditional view that happiness has nothing to do with romance but everything to do with living in competence. The reliable and earnest quality of Han, in reality, is embodied in all aspects of his social life. Another shot, Shen Hong shuttling on the busy bridge, the boy sings again: "We embrace like two intimately lingering butterflies, nothing can separate us till the end of life." which makes a prophecy that all romantic hope for love will be vain. For Shen Hong comfortably well-off, love between her and Guo is not pure as it was before when Shen appeals more for affection, while Guo indulges in an extravagant life. Consequently, Shen cannot tolerate a marriage without love, divorcing Guo. When Shen Hong leaves this much broken-hearted county, a meaningful scene emerges: Shen sit quietly in the bow of the boat facing the green river, emerald mountains, vast and clear sky. It plainly stands out as goodness and hope compared with the depressing atmosphere in most scenes. She strives to free herself from the shackles of an unfaithful marriage rather than compromising. And she manages it by dispelling the conventional thought that a woman must follow her husband till death and accepting the affirmation of modern civilization to the value of life.

The film does not try to conceal the "tragedies", but exposes the bleak scenes on the screen. However, the film shows no malediction or agonized accusation to life. Instead, such spontaneous records provide the real and natural expression of "love" in the special period of social transformation, as well as delve into the spirit of revolt of these commons to life as well. These people never forsake hope in dim surroundings and proceed on their way to find out what love should be. So much is it believed by Han Sanming who saves his marriage with a note of address. Fortunately, the poor couple reunite and unearth their cherishable love. Although it grieves Shen Hong to break with the past, she finally extricates herself from humble love.

How the two protagonists pursue love inspires us to examine the definition on "love". Han Sanming bought his wife Ma Yaomei from an abductor, but in this illegal arranged marriage they eventually find true love after years of sufferings and hardships. Conversely, Shen Hong and Guo

Bin both married for love, but their story ends with Guo's betrayal. Ironically, here, the end results of arranged marriage and free one breach the binary opposition. So we may doubt, in this materialistic world, is it right to sacrifice our commitment to love for personal interests like Guo Bin? Or should we stick to loyalty like Han Sanming, sharing weal and woe with the other? Certainly, many young people, including Shen Hong, dream of unforgettable and eternal love, but unfortunately, so unrealistic is it in this vulgar world. Here, the film takes Shen's lonely and endless journey as a metaphor for her futile struggle with destiny.

Jia Zhangke calls himself "film laborer" because his films project laborers like "migrant workers", "thieves", "grassroots artists" and "vagrants". Impressed by the desire and yearning for love of the underclass, Jia foregrounds everyone's equal right for pursuing love, totally irrelevant to one's social status and vocation.<sup>[2]</sup> Therefore, emerging on the screen, these figures, presented from an unusual angle, are vigorous and spirited, in stark contrast to those bullied and suppressed ones in other works. *Still Life* was released at the same time in 2006 with *Curse of the Golden Flower* (directed by Zhang Yimou). Based on reality, the former depicts the austere lifestyle of commons at the bottom in Three Gorges Reservoir area. By comparison, the latter one teems with scenes of luxuries in ostentatiously golden setting and superstars. In view of the popularity, some consider *Still Life* destined to be overwhelmed by *Curse of the Golden Flower*. However, Jia responded to these queries when interviewed in Shanghai: "I just want to see who cares about life of 'commons' in such an era of 'gold' worshipping."<sup>[3]</sup> Jia's witty pun showed he will be devoted to maintain the dignity of the bottom people and be a good "film laborer" to record the reality.

### 3. Home: Persistence and Loss

A writer, Han Songluo, ever described "home" in *The Code by the Lake*: "One's sentiment for home may be a lake, a sunny afternoon, a period of time, a glimpse of dusk, a trace of smell, some misty memories, or woeful emotions when wandering in other places." No matter how small or low our home is, warmth will embrace us only if accompanied. From the perspective of "strangers", *Still Life* exposes how people in Three Gorges Reservoir area forced to relocate face the loss of their homeland to us.

André Bazin, the famous French film theorist and pioneer of "New Wave" film revolution, stated: "The aesthetic feature of photography is to restore the truth... What attracts me most are those documentary shots in which one may look on indifferently as a bystander because they have nothing to do with one's customary views and prejudices, thus removing self-impressions attached to the realities." So did *Still Life* in truth-recording. As the plot develops, the task of demolition becomes more urgent with the implementing of project to build reservoirs. However, that people here live as usual, bustling about or talking jovially, seems to contradict with the melancholy fate of this dilapidated place. Then, what haunts us most are not the painful pursuit for love of protagonists but the embarrassing situations of this place gradually eroded by demolition and river. The concrete iron exposed under the scorching sun and the staff disinfecting the remains are witnesses of this place being erased, whereas, when the staff enters a demolished house, the camera shows its walls, a poster with encouraging slogan, a certificate of merit and some photos hanged, tenacious and unyielding, provoking strong surges of nostalgia for the past.

*Still Life* is not only a feature film, but also a documentary for the county about to perish. Through the synchronous sound accompanied by the view of that era, the film is shot with a discourse strategy that enables viewers present on the scene as if by seeking to bring them back to reality. Translated as *Still Life* when released abroad, the film aims to unfold nearly stagnant pace of life of people struggling in the state of dereliction. Admittedly, those people living here for generations, witnessing the collapse of their homeland, are forced to compromise and compelled to leave their homes when confronted with the powerful torrent of social change. They also mourn for the loss of homeland, as showed in the old hotel owner who threatens the staff performing their duties: "Young men, if you dare tear down my house, I will give you some lessons!" The old man tries to guard his house from being demolished, a last-ditch fight against the drastic social change. But he failed. We cannot help thinking how vulnerable people like him are, in the procession of

social development.

“Birds coming back from afar turn around the homeland several times but cannot find the original branch to perch on.”, the verse approximately reflecting their conditions. Having lost their homes, these outcasts are lost in inexplicable fear and bewilderment. However, the film seems to alleviate their pain by creating a “Utopia” via surrealist symbolic elements and absurd shots--a UFO with faint glow, the memorial tower soaring to the sky, cos-players holding mobile phones, and a man walking on wire between two tall buildings, suggesting that home will always be there as time goes by. They may find dream nowhere in reality, but the film “rebuild” a new home for them in this virtual world. When it comes to motivation for the film, Jia recalled: “I am present, so I cannot evade my obligation to help others, even in the face of such an ancient city imminent to disappear.” Combining reality and humanities, the images not only provide a real record of the sluggish reality but encourage us learn to find happiness in wandering as Heidegger thought.<sup>[4]</sup> On another scene, when Han Sanming and his co-workers respectively identify their won hometowns on a piece of 50 yuan and a piece of 10 yuan, they suddenly suspect where their home is in this changeable society and whether home will still be there as time passes by. As the same with Han and his co-workers, we never notice details in these pieces of paper money passed from hand to hand, but they will be attached with a lasting nostalgia when affinitive to “home”.

What aroused my empathy most is not the warmth and affections in the film, but those drudges who toil and moil all day long with hammers, sweating under the scorching sun. The chaotic and gloomy environment they live in constitutes a strong visual contrast to the prosperity in modern cities. Thus, it exposes the a cruel social status quo that, it would be harsh and vain for people at the bottom with limited competence to elbow their way in this materialistic society. In a singing hall at night, they scream with cathartic laughter like animal yelp, an outlet of depression that brought tears to their eyes. When the lyrics say: “Where there is a land, there is a home...”, these wretched man burst into tears. But where is home? Virtually, Brother Ma in the film is spiritually homeless. He blindly follows the brotherhood of man and yearns for the unrealistic life of sinister gangs exaggerated by media, even imitates a TV character, trying to find some affinities. More than that, his insanity and blind obedience takes his life as expense. At last, he is buried in ruins by antagonists in a fight. Then, when the phone rings in the ruins, Han Sanming rushing to the burial place, we are so tortured by the sufferings and absurdities to survive in this capricious world. In another shot, three Sichuan Opera actors in costumes of Liu Bei, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei(three sworn brothers in the history of China) respectively, have dinner together but each has his own mind. In fact, suggesting their brotherhood in the dilemma of life bound to be buried with the city. Gone with the city are all commons in Three Gorges Reservoir area, including Han Sanming’s daughter who has gone to south alone for living. All these people feel rootless accompanied by an aching void, which results from a loss of “home”.

#### 4. Conclusion

A Sichuan Opera Lin Chong on the Run(Lin Chong is a hero of a story), the tragic and heroic song emerges as background music at the beginning and the end of the film. The director takes Lin Chong, the hero as a metaphor for Han Sanming and his co-workers who are forced to leave hometown and work for a better life at the risk of their lives. Indeed, they have to endure the parting with their close kin for the sake of their families, just as the song goes: “Looking at the hometown afar, clouds and mountains set us apart, I wonder where my wife and children are.”<sup>[5]</sup> Thus, the man on wire at the end of the film is also used as a metaphor for those “heros”, a moan full of helplessness lamenting their desperate fates. Different from sweeping narrations from macro-scope preferred by other directors, Jia Zhangke concentrates his efforts on records of people at the bottom from a micro-angle. In Fengjie, this small county about to be abandoned, there are many warm-hearted commons who strive to live their lives to the best in desperate plight. Though they look very smooth externally as the water surface, at bottom they are very passionate as the roaring waves. Thus, from the respective of self-redemption of common people, we can take a glimpse of worldly love and warmth. That means, in pursuit for “love” and “home” nowadays, the course never

runs smooth, but that is not to say you are confronted with a ruthless and indifferent world. All of us will be cherished with love. As Jia Zhangke said: "People proceed cautiously besieged by the crisis-prone surroundings. Yet in the world of crisis and oppression comes the poetic romance, conciliating our tension from thrilling scrupulousness."<sup>[6]</sup> This is life! Any glorious or "flower-like" ideal in life entails harsh endeavors, even the risk of one's life as the man on wire showed in the film. Somehow, though, full of poetic romance and sought-for sublimity is the journey of life in which we, "commons", are embraced with "love" and "home".

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