

old to the emerging young, Wang Xiaoshuai in *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) zooms in on the “lost generation” of urban youth, cast adrift by rapid growth and the disintegration of family and neighborhood.

One recurring motif in these films intertwines the hyperreal with the hyporeal. Animated interludes and special effects are strewn almost incongruously across comedies and neorealist dramas, but such intrusion portends heightened fantasy tantamount to wish-

fulfillment. A case in point: animated characters in flight or in constant motion eerily link sensibilities as diverse as Feng Xiaogang’s tragicomedies and Jia Zhangke’s muted tragedies. The hyperreal is employed to create light comedy as well as to assuage (futilely of course) the yearning for freedom from the hyporeal, such as migrant laborers in the city. In *Big Shot’s Funeral* (2001), characters are treated to an animated dramatization of the “comedy funeral” for the American film director in a coma at the Beijing hospital. The

## A Portrait of Waiting

By Joy Chia

**A review of *Still Life* (2006)**

**Directed by Jia Zhangke**

**Running Time: 108 minutes**

**(Mandarin with English subtitles)**

*Still Life* chronicles the experiences of ordinary people whose lives have been overturned by the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Lush cinematic shots of the region’s mountains, which occupy a central place in the Chinese poetic canon, are juxtaposed with the prosaic act of taking cities and lives apart in the name of “progress.”

Set in what is left of the town of Fengjie, 150 miles upstream from the Three Gorges Dam, the movie ostensibly tells the story of two people searching for their respective spouses. Yet, the movie is more a showcase for the suspension of time and the act of waiting. Fengjie is in the middle of self-deconstruction as its deserted buildings await the rising waters. Only the old, those too tired to move, and migrant workers—employed to demolish the buildings by hand—are left.

Construction for the Three Gorges Dam started in 1994 and is slated for completion in 2011. At an official cost of US \$25 billion (but probably more), the dam is expected to be the world’s largest hydro-electric power station, and is harkened to be an extraordinary engineering feat. In the wake of this achievement, however, is the reality that construction

has caused the relocation of more than 2.3 million people and is expected to affect four million more. The environmental effects of the dam have been called catastrophic, while historical and archeologically-important sites are being submerged underwater. Stark scenes of this destruction are presented clinically in *Still Life* as construction workers mark the expected height of the waters onto the side of the buildings. The expressionless faces of the workers, most of whom are migrants with no emotional connection to the place they are marking for destruction, are sharply contrasted with the emotional reaction of those whose lives are tied up in the age-old villages. A main character, Han Sanming, seeking to return to a street where his wife and child lived, is taken to the riverbank and shown that the entire neighborhood now sits underwater.

*Still Life* was the surprise winner of the Golden Lion Award for Best Film at the 2006 Venice Film Festival, and has been shown to critical acclaim. From the opening scene panning across the deck of a ferry with the region’s majestic mountains as backdrop, through the ending shot of a man walking a tightrope between two abandoned buildings, *Still Life* uses human bodies as often as landscape to populate its cinematic tableaux. Part of its allure is that Jia Zhangke empathetically captures how the characters are immobile in their waiting, yet constantly transient without much direction. The movie is difficult to get through, however, since it is a lengthy film in which the viewer does just as much waiting as the characters.