

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

A Film by Jia Zhang-Ke



2018 – CHINA, FRANCE – DRAMA – MANDARIN – 141 MINUTES

PRODUCTION NOTES

US Distributor:

Cohen Media Group
Maya Anand
646.380.7932
maya@cohenmedia.net

East Coast Publicists:

Sophie Gluck & Associates
Sophie Gluck and Aimee Morris
212.595.2432
sophie@gluckpr.com
aimee@gluckpr.com

West Coast Publicists

Block-Korenbrot
Ziggy Kozlowski
323.634.7001
zkozlowski@bk-pr.com



ASH IS PUREST WHITE

Synopsis

Qiao is in love with Bin, a local mobster.

During a fight between rival gangs, she fires a gun to protect him.

Qiao gets five years in prison for this act of loyalty.

Upon her release, she goes looking for Bin to pick up where they left off.

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

While I was editing my earlier films UNKNOWN PLEASURES (2002) and STILL LIFE (2006), both of which starred Zhao Tao, I simplified the storylines by cutting some of her love scenes.

But when I went back to look at those deleted scenes, the two characters she'd played somehow blended together in my mind.

In my imagination, this woman was born and raised in my hometown, a coal-mining region in northwest China. She was named Qiaoqiao ("Qiao" for short) and fell in love with a "jianghu" (underworld) type. Their love and torment would open the story. By 2006 they are both middle-aged and the man leaves for the Three Gorges area. She follows him there, but their relationship is broken. Everything that would happen from then on gave free rein to my imagination.

When I look back at the character Zhao Tao played in UNKNOWN PLEASURES, I see purity, simplicity and unconditional love. Yet when I look back at the STILL LIFE character, I see complexity, sadness and displays that camouflage true feelings. Time has changed the way she looks, but cinema records the way that time has shaped her. The deleted scenes inspired me to imagine what would have become of this woman – and the man she once loved – in the present day.

I borrowed the film's Chinese title JIANGHU ERNÜ ("Sons and Daughters of the Jianghu") from the last project of Fei Mu, the Chinese film master who was active in the 1930s and 1940s and who is best known for SPRING IN A SMALL TOWN (1948). The script, which Fei Mu wrote was later filmed by Zhu Shilin; the film had the English title THE SHOW MUST GO ON. It's a story set in a touring circus. My film has nothing to do with that story, but I loved the Chinese title. The Chinese word "Ernü" ("Sons and Daughters") connotes men and women who dare to love and hate. On the other hand, "Jianghu" (literally "Rivers and lakes", but it's hard to capture the real meaning in English) conjures up a world of dramatic emotions, not to mention a world of real dangers. When you put the two words together, the title evokes people who dare to challenge the mainstream and people who live by the morality of kindness and enmity, love and hatred.

That Chinese title almost says it all. The couple in the film lives on the margins of society. They survive by challenging the orthodox social order. I didn't set out to defend them, rather to empathize with their predicament. It reminds me in some ways of the first decade of my career, when it was risky to make films expressing one's true self and truths about society. So I threw myself into writing the script as if I were writing about my own emotional journeys: my lost youth and my fantasy about the future: to live, to love and to be free.

The film opens in China at the outset of the 21st century and closes in 2018. I've always been interested in stories with a long time-span: time holds the secrets of life, stories and experiences.

The "jianghu" belongs to those who have no home. In the first part of the film, "jianghu" is the conflicts between rival underworld groups in Shanxi. It's also the sense of crisis felt by the older generation in the face of the new generation. And it's a story such as you might find in westerns, set in desolate landscapes, in cold weather, around old coalmines. The second part of the film is set in the Three Gorges area on the Yangtze River, where the dams under construction will cause entire towns to disappear. Our character Qiao is first deceived, then deceives others: she uses

the survival skills she learned in prison to negotiate the margins of this society. The final part returns us to Shanxi, where the male protagonist Bin sets off on a new journey precisely because he needs the “jianghu” – the places that will bring his inner drama to life. This is also where Qiao elects to stay, seeking her own kind of excitements.

There is one place in the film which Qiao never gets to, and that's Xinjiang in China's deep northwest. Maybe everyone has a place like that, a place they never reach, not because it's too far away but because it's so hard to begin a new life. We cannot break away from our emotional ties, from the loves, memories and routines, which prevent us from flying high. These bonds are like the gravity, which ties us to this planet and prevents us from going off into space. An emotional gravity fixes us in social relationships, and that makes it impossible to walk away freely. And when we do struggle to break free, the result reflects our human dignity.

I now have 48 years of life experiences, and I want to use them to tell a love story set in a contemporary China, which has gone through epic and dramatic transformations. It makes me feel that I've lived that way myself – and that I still do.

Jia Zhang-Ke (April 2018)

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

Q&A WITH JIA ZHANG-KE

The structure of ASH IS PUREST WHITE echoes the time frame of MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART, but the tone and characters are very different this time. Why did you decide to focus on characters from the “jianghu” underworld?

The mystique of the “jianghu” is a very important part of Chinese culture. Many underworld societies were formed in ancient China, rooted in particular industries or regions. They were networks, which transcended family relationships and local clan identities, providing support and a way of life for lower-class people. The most common spiritual symbol of “jianghu” culture is Lord Guan. He represents loyalty and righteousness, the core values of the “jianghu”. You can see how that works in the opening scene of the film: the character Jia refuses to acknowledge his debt to another guy, and Bin makes him confess the truth in front of the statue of Lord Guan, their spiritual totem.

After the communist victory in 1949, China's underworld societies gradually disappeared. The characters in ASH IS PUREST WHITE are not gangs in the old sense. They came into existence after the “reform and opening-up” movement of the late 1970s and inherited the violent legacy of the “Cultural Revolution” years. They learned their morals and protocols from the Hong Kong gangster movies of the 1980s. They developed their own distinctive ways of handling relationships as a way of surviving and helping each other amid all the drastic social changes that China was going through.

The “jianghu” is a world of adventure and a world of unique emotions. I've always been interested in “jianghu” love stories in which the characters fear neither love nor hate. The story of this film spans the years between 2001 and 2018, years of enormous social upheaval. People's traditional values and the ways they live have changed beyond recognition in these years. And yet the “jianghu” clings to its own values and codes of conduct and functions in its own way. This seems ironic, but I find it curiously attractive.

Qiao and Bin didn't get married. As I see it, that's their fate – but also a symbol of their rebellion.

Have you drawn on factual sources again, as you did in A TOUCH OF SIN, or is this story entirely fictional?

It's fictional, but it's based on all kinds of “jianghu” rumors. Some of the details came from friends of mine.

The first section of the story incorporates some footage, which you shot nearly twenty years ago. Was that old footage the starting point for the whole project?

I got my first digital video camera in 2001. I took it to Datong in Shanxi back then and shot tons of material. It was all completely hit-and-miss. I shot people I saw in factories, bus stations, on buses, in ballrooms, saunas, karaoke bars, all kinds of places. I kept on shooting such material right up to 2006, when I made STILL LIFE.

Recently, when I've gone back to look at that old material, I somehow found it more and more alien to me. I'd always assumed that changes in Chinese society are gradual, not something that happens overnight. So looking back at this old material was a shock, bringing home to me

how suddenly things have changed. It's only when I look at those old videos that I remember how everything looked back then.

Before I wrote the script for ASH IS PUREST WHITE, I rough-cut some of that old footage into a ten-minute documentary short, which brought back so many memories. ASH begins with a fragment shot on a public bus. I wanted to start the film that way because journeys are crucial to "jianghu" mythology. The stories about "jianghu" legends always make a point of the adventurous way they roam around.

Those faces on the bus remind me of a philosophical "jianghu" saying: "Wherever there are people, the jianghu exists". The name "jianghu" literally means "rivers and lakes", but in Chinese philosophy the term connotes "different people". The characters in the story have encountered more people than most of us do. So the film needed to begin with a group image.

You've returned to the Three Gorges for the middle part of the story, and it's an area, which represents both China's progress and development and the loss of old communities and traditions. What keeps drawing you to the area?

Yes, it's become an important location in my films – both because it exemplifies all the drastic changes in modern China and because the actual landscape remains more or less the same. It still looks like a classical Chinese painting.

The Three Gorges are on the Yangtze River (in Chinese, the "Changjiang"), in an area where almost every county has its own pier on the river. Countless boats bring new people every day, and take others away. There's a constant sense of movement and chaos. The dam project in the area has forced a large number of people to relocate. On the one side, a huge national project; on the other, the break-ups of families and loved ones. The film's story opens in Datong, Shanxi Province, in the cold and arid north, and moves into the Three Gorges, in the warm and humid southwest. The enormous environmental differences open up a huge space for the film. From Shanxi all the way to her dream of a new life in Xinjiang in the far northwest, Qiao embarks on a long journey of exile. She travels across more than 7,700km of China in the course of the story.

The people living in the Three Gorges area have their own distinctive dialects, and linguistic diversity was another thing I wanted to pursue in the film. In the first part of the film, you hear dialogue in the Shanxi dialect. In the middle part, you hear the higher-pitched Chongqing dialect.

Remembering the monument, which took off like a rocket in STILL LIFE, do you have an interest in UFOs? In this film, the guy from Karamay who wants to start "UFO tourism" in Xinjiang is one of your most intriguing characters.

In recent years I've spent much of my time in the town where I was born: Fenyang in Shanxi Province. I live in a village there. When night falls, there are always millions of stars in the sky and the moon seems particularly bright. The night sky there makes me think of outer space and other planets. To my surprise, I've found myself starting to wonder about aliens. Most of the time it's just a wild fantasy, but it does give you a new macro perspective on human life on earth.

The UFO guy in the film in a sense speaks for all of us when he goes on about his theories about visitors from space. What he expresses, indirectly, is the loneliness of humankind existing in this vast universe. He could be revealing the essence of our existence.

You are one of the most cinephile of Chinese directors, and I wonder if you had any particular “jianghu” movies in mind while making this film?

From Zhang Che to John Woo and Johnnie To, many of the jianghu classics in Hong Kong cinema are old favorites of mine. When I was in junior high school I watched many of them in places where they showed imported videotapes. In ASH IS PUREST WHITE I used the soundtrack from John Woo's “The Killer” in the karaoke bar scene and in the street gunfight scene. And I've used Sally Yeh's song Qianzui Yisheng (“Drunk for Life”) in many of my films; for me, it captures the voice of jianghu love. There's also a short clip from Taylor Wong's “Tragic Hero” in the film.

You're working with a different cinematographer this time (Eric Gautier, known for his work with Olivier Assayas, Walter Salles and Leos Carax, amongst many others). Was the experience different from working with your regular cinematographer Yu Lik-Wai?

I've worked with Yu Lik-Wai since my debut feature Xiao Wu (PICKPOCKET), but when I went into pre-production for ASH IS PUREST WHITE he was busy preparing a film he wanted to direct himself and didn't have time to work on our project. We both came up with Eric Gautier as a potential replacement DoP in perfect sync. Yu speaks very good French, so he contacted Eric on my behalf and invited him to come to China to work on the film.

My first meeting with Eric was in Beijing. He and Olivier Assayas were in the middle of a collaboration at the time. I'd seen his exceptional talent in films by Assayas and Walter Salles, so I felt really honored to have the chance to work with him.

The first difficulty Eric had to overcome was language, but he constantly surprised me on set by his familiarity with the script. He had every actor's lines off by heart. Even when an actor improvised and went off-script, he got it right away. So, as it turned out, language was not a problem. And we invariably agreed about characters and spaces in the film. A few days into the shoot I began to make some bold decisions about the scheduling of scenes. But he was never phased. I'm very glad that I found another cinematographer who could give me powerful support with the images.

Eric respected the footage I'd shot on my old DV camera. We decided to use five different cameras to make the film, so that the different image textures could help tell the story of the changing times. We used DV for the early scenes, and then later Digibeta and HD video. We used actual film for the Three Gorges part. And for the last part of the story we tried the new REDWEAPON camera. Eric managed to unify all these different image sources, and the image-textures did bring us memories of different moments in the past.

Q&A by Tony Rayns (April 2018)

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

Q&A WITH LIAO FAN

Was working with Jia Zhang-Ke for the first time different from your experiences with other directors? Any surprises?

I remember the time in Datong when we filmed the scene where Guo Bin leaves Qiao's place and walks out into the unknown. It's Bin's final appearance in the film. I reached the set a bit late that day, and it took me a little while to find Jia Zhang-Ke. He was sitting in a corner, puffing on a cigar. I came up to him and was surprised to see tears on his cheeks. I joked, trying to lighten the mood: "Sorry I'm late, but please don't take it so badly! I feel kind of stressed all of a sudden." He was silent for a moment, then he said: "It has nothing to do with you. It's just that this scene reminds me of the first time I ran away from home when I was young. I feel a bit sad." At that moment, the sadness and loneliness somehow drew me in. Since we were in that state of mind, we finished the shooting very quickly that day. That was one of the few times when our director showed his personal feelings during the shoot.

In real life, Jia Zhang-Ke is rather like a gentle, articulate teacher. His writing is simple but also vivid; his descriptions of everyday life are exceptional. The characters he writes express his thoughts quite naturally, just through the way they behave in everyday situations. As you watch it, it's all very convincing. But he's something else again when he's on set. He's an intense and daring person who instinctively feels and creates the scene he wants. The pleasure he takes in directing the film affects and influences the entire crew, so that everyone shares it.

I guess there are plenty of real-life 'Guo Bin' types in China. Did you have any models in mind when you approached the role?

Many people around me have experienced stories like Guo Bin's. For example, my brother and his peers who went south to Guangdong in the 1990s, looking for business opportunities. Or the best friend I grew up with who never left our hometown and never fulfilled any of his dreams. Or the legendary big shot who once had it all but then suddenly disappeared. Or the young man I once interviewed in the hospital where he was getting rehab; he'd just embarked on his career when he was struck down by a stroke. All of these people reflect Guo Bin in one way or another, and their experiences gave me ideas of how to depict this character. They are people who will not passively accept their 'fate', who risk their lives to fight back and who aren't content with the life that seems mapped out in front of them. Of course, the result isn't always what they wish.

You're no stranger to noir stories and characters, but Guo Bin is perhaps closer to present-day social realities than many of them. How do you see his machismo? Is he a common male type in China today?

Yes, there are many real-life Guo Bins in China today. Actually, the social status of women has greatly improved, and I don't think his machismo is really a kind of misogyny. I think it's more a response to the way he sees himself. He was once a big fish in a small pond, a man with strong desires. He understood very well that social status springs from money and power. But his glory days passed all too quickly. Reluctant to accept defeat, he struggles and keeps on trying. That's the essence of his machismo. No matter where you go, you'll always find men like that.

Q&A by Tony Rayns (April 2018)

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

DIRECTOR JIA ZHANG-KE'S BIOGRAPHY

One of the most admired directors in world cinema, Jia Zhang-Ke was born in Fenyang, Shanxi, in 1970. He graduated from the Beijing Film Academy and is widely regarded as one of the leading figures of the "Sixth Generation" of Chinese filmmakers.

His debut feature XIAO WU (PICKPOCKET) won awards at the Berlin, San Francisco, Vancouver, and Pusan Film Festivals, among others. Since then, his films have premiered at the major film festivals including the Cannes, Venice, Toronto and New York Film Festivals. STILL LIFE won the 2006 Venice Film Festival's Golden Lion and numerous other awards including the Los Angeles Film Critics Awards for Best Foreign Language Film and Best Cinematography. A TOUCH OF SIN won the Best Screenplay prize at the 2013 Cannes International Film Festival.

Several of Jia Zhang-Ke's films have blurred the line between fiction and documentary. Besides his directing career he has produced many films by young directors, and made cameo appearances in films by other directors.

DIRECTOR'S FILMOGRAPHY

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

Cannes 2018, Competition

MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART

Cannes 2015, Competition

A TOUCH OF SIN

Cannes 2013, Best Screenplay Award

I WISH I KNEW (documentary)

Cannes 2010, Un Certain Regard

24 CITY

Cannes 2008, Competition

USELESS (documentary)

Venice 2007, Venice Horizons Documentary Award

STILL LIFE

Venice 2006, Golden Lion Award

DONG (documentary)

Venice 2006, Horizon

THE WORLD

Venice 2004, Competition

UNKNOWN PLEASURES

Cannes 2002, Competition

IN PUBLIC (documentary)

Marseilles 2001, Grand Prix

PLATFORM

Venice 2000, Competition

XIAO WU

Berlin 1998, Wolfgang Staudte Award & Netpac Award

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

ZHAO TAO(AS QIAO) BIOGRAPHY

Zhao Tao graduated from the Department of Chinese Folk Dance of the Beijing Dance Academy. She obtained several awards in domestic dancing competitions and began to work with director Jia Zhang-Ke in 2000. The film STILL LIFE, which she starred in, won the Golden Lion Award at the 2006 Venice International Film Festival. She is also one of the producers of Jia Zhang-Ke's documentary USELESS (2007,) which won the Venice Horizons Documentary Award at the 64th Venice International Film Festival. In 2012, as the lead actress of the Italian film SHUN LI AND THE POET (IO SONO LI), she won the David di Donatello Best Actress Award, the first time that the prize was given to an Asian actress.

SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

ASH IS PUREST WHITE by Jia Zhang-Ke

Cannes 2018, Competition

MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART by Jia Zhang-Ke

Miami 2015, Grand Jury Prize for Best Performance

A TOUCH OF SIN by Jia Zhang-Ke

2013

SHUN LI AND THE POET (IO SONO LI) by Andrea Segre

2011, Best Actress Award at David di Donatello Awards, Best Actress Award at Asti International Film Festival, Best Actress Award at Bimbi Belli 2012

I WISH I KNEW by Jia Zhang-Ke

2010

TEN THOUSAND WAVES by Isaac Julien

2010

24 CITY by Jia Zhang-Ke

2008

STILL LIFE by Jia Zhang-Ke

2006

THE WORLD by Jia Zhang-Ke

2004

UNKNOWN PLEASURES by Jia Zhang-Ke

2002

PLATFORM by Jia Zhang-Ke

2000

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

LIAO FAN (AS BIN) BIOGRAPHY

Liao Fan is a Chinese film and theatre actor and a graduate of the Shanghai Theatre Academy. He won the Silver Bear for Best Actor at the 2014 Berlin International Film Festival for his performance in **BLACK COAL, THIN ICE** directed by Diao Yinan.

SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

ASH IS PUREST WHITE by Jia Zhang-Ke
Cannes 2018, Competition

THE FINAL MASTER by Haofeng Xu
2015

BLACK COAL, THIN ICE by Yi'nan Diao
Berlin 2014, Golden Bear for Best Film and Silver Bear for Best Actor; Best Actor Award at Asian Film Awards

CHINESE ZODIAC by Jackie Chan
2012

ASSEMBLY by Xiaogang Feng
2007

ASH IS PUREST WHITE

ERIC GAUTIER

Director of Photography **BIOGRAPHY**

A graduate of the Louis Lumière film school in Paris, renowned French cinematographer Eric Gautier has collaborated with directors such as Walter Salles (*Motorcycle Diaries*, for which Gautier won the Cannes Film Festival Technical Grand Prix and an Independent Spirit Award,) Ang Lee, Arnaud Desplechin, Alain Resnais, Olivier Assayas, Agnès Varda, Sean Penn, Léos Carax, and many others.

SELECTIVE FILMOGRAPHY

- ASH IS PUREST WHITE** by Jia Zhang-Ke - 2018
- RABIN, THE LAST DAY** by Amos Gitai – 2015
- HITCHCOCK/TRUFFAUT** by Kent Jones - 2015
- VOUS N'AVEZ ENCORE RIEN VU** by Alain Resnais - 2012
- TAKING WOODSTOCK** by Ang Lee – 2009
- WILD GRASS** by Alain Resnais - 2009
- SUMMER HOURS** by Olivier Assayas - 2008
- A CHRISTMAS TALE** by Arnaud Desplechin - 2008
- WILD GRASS** by Alain Resnais - 2008
- INTO THE WILD** by Sean Penn - Lumiere Award 2007, Best Technical Achievement
- PRIVATE FEARS IN PUBLIC PLACES** by Alain Resnais - 2006
- ONE STAYS, THE OTHER LEAVES** by Claude Berri - 2005
- CLEAN** by Olivier Assayas - 2004
- GABRIELLE** by Patrice Chéreau – 2005
- SON FRERE** – By Patrice Chéreau - 2003
- THE MOTORCYCLE DIARIES** by Walter Salles - 2004 – Cannes' Technical Grand Prize;
Best Cinematography at the Independent Spirit Awards
- SAVAGE SOULS** by Raul Ruiz - 2001
- INTIMACY** by Patrice Chéreau - 2001
- ESTHER KAHN** by Arnaud Desplechin - 2000
- POLA X** by Leos Carax - 1998
- THOSE WHO LOVE ME CAN TAKE THE TRAIN** by Patrice Chéreau - 1998 - César Award for Best
Cinematography
- MY SEX LIFE... OR HOW I GOT INTO AN ARGUMENT** by Arnaud Desplechin - 1998
- IRMA VEP** by Olivier Assayas – 1996
- ONE HUNDRED AND ONE NIGHTS** by Agnes Varda - 1995
- LA VIE DES MORTS** by Arnaud Desplechin - 1991

CAST

ZHAO Tao

LIAO Fan

XU Zheng

Casper LIANG

SPECIAL APPEARANCE

FENG Xiaogang DIAO Yinan ZHANG Yibai DING Jiali ZHANG Yi DONG Zijian

CREW

A film by JIA Zhang-Ke

Written by JIA Zhang-Ke

Produced by Shozo ICHIYAMA

Coproduced by ZHANG Dong

XIANG Shaokun

Juliette SCHRAMECK

Associate producers WANG Tianyun

Josie CHOU

WAN Jiahuan

ZHAO Yijun

LIU Zhe

Music LIM Giong

Production manager ZHANG Dong

First assistant director WANG Jing

Director of photography Eric GAUTIER, A.F.C.

Editing Matthieu LACLAU

LIN Xudong

Sound designer ZHANG Yang

Sound mixer Olivier GOINARD

Art director LIU Weixin

Executive Producers REN Zhonglun

JIA Zhang-Ke

DONG Ping

Nathanaël & Elisha KARMITZ LIU Shiyu

ZHU Weijie

YANG Jinsong

Production SHANGHAI FILM GROUP CORPORATION

XSTREAM PICTURES (BEIJING)

HUANXI MEDIA GROUP LIMITED (TAI ZHOU)

HUANXI MEDIA GROUP LIMITED (TIA NJIN)

MK PRODUCTIONS

In coproduction with ARTE FRANCE CINÉMA

With the participation of ARTE FRANCE

BEIJING RUNJIN INVESTMENT

WISHART MEDIA CO., LTD.

ENCHANT (SHANGHAI) FILM AND TELEVISION CULTURE CO., LTD.

International Sales MK2 FILMS