



CHINESE VISUAL FESTIVAL

# Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue

## Jia Zhangke on 'Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue'

*When you made *Dong* and *Useless* more than ten years ago, you spoke about making a trilogy of films about China's artists. Is *Swimming Out* the third part of a trilogy?*

*Dong* in 2006 was my first documentary about a Chinese artist. At that time Chinese society was embracing consumerism. Artists and serious-minded works of art were marginalised. The public had little interest in works of art which discussed real-life problems and explored historical truths. They took the view that art should be 'pure' and free from any political agenda. That kind of attitude, so rigid emotionally, made me feel the need to make documentaries on artists. I was hoping to inspire a greater interest in works of art that are close to life, and especially an interest in recognising beauty through the experience. Many artists in China today are very sensitive individuals, almost as if they had some weird 'prophetic' abilities. Their creativity interacts with many developments in society. I felt the need to make a film that would make such work better known. I went on to make *Useless* in 2007, about fashion designer Ma Ke. After that, I put the project on hold.

In recent years, China has witnessed rapid urbanisation. Many young people are migrating from the villages and towns where they were born to the great metropolises. Rural areas are declining, reduced to populations of the very young and very old. For a country with thousands of years of agricultural history, rural decay produces changes in traditional ways of living, interpersonal relationships and ethical morality. And young people now have plenty of experience of city life, but very little sense of rural life.

While being very aware of this, I also noticed that some Chinese writers were moving in the opposite direction. They were shifting their focus from big cities back to the countryside or small towns, looking at the changes from the ground up. Nothing has a more profound influence on the spiritual world of the Chinese people than the ancestral village. The village gives our understanding of contemporary China a foundation and an historical perspective.

With these thoughts in mind, I realised that I wanted to make a documentary about contemporary writers. Taken with the two earlier films, it completes what I call the 'Artists Trilogy', extending my 'spiritual portraits' project.

*Why writers in particular? How did you choose the four writers (one dead, three living) who are presented in the film?*

As it happens, the lives and writings of the four featured authors parallel the 70-year history of contemporary China since 1949. The first covered in the film is the late Ma Feng, whose most creative period was the 17 years prior to the Cultural Revolution – the time known as 'the period of socialist construction' in China. His writing was tied in with dramatic social reforms. 'Revolutionary literature and art' is an unavoidable subject when it comes to building a spiritual portrait of modern China. Collectivism in the 1950s solved

some problems and caused some new ones. That's the historical starting point for understanding our current social structure and our contemporary literature.

The other three writers seen in the film span the years since then. Jia Pingwa, born in the 1950s, focuses on the 'Cultural Revolution' and its aftermath (that is, the 1960s and 70s), a time that was full of trauma and helplessness. Yu Hua, born in 1960, is the third writer in the film. His experiences date from the 1980s, China's 'reform and opening up' period, when there was a social thaw and individualism revived. The fourth writer, Liang Hong, is a woman born in the late 1970s. Her account of her work coincides with the present.

I want to highlight the last person presented in the film, Liang Hong's 14-year-old son. His interest in and confusion about his family history gives me an opportunity to peek into the spiritual world of the coming generation.

*Yu Hua is in some ways the film's odd-man-out, less rooted in a rural environment than the others and less inclined to bring his own family background into his writing. Does that make him less 'representative' of China's modern writers?*

Yu Hua emerged in the 1980s as a pioneering writer. Unlike preceding generations, he was never forced to sacrifice his literary practice on the altar of 'revolutionary literature and art'. When he began, other Chinese writers were already striving for more openness and diversity in Chinese literature. He was an individualist from the very start, using his personal feelings to describe Chinese society. He looks like an odd-man-out in the film because he brings a different ideology to his literary world; he's even something of a post-modernist. So his work brings an ironic attitude into play, something that earlier writers wouldn't have attempted; he sets out to dispel hypocrisy and challenge authority, facing the darkness deep down by cutting through the sugar-coating. He represents a generation that respects individual experience and rejects the image of an idealised society. He often sets his work in townships precisely because those are the places where urban and rural traits intersect. Townships themselves are structured by their relationship with the countryside, country people and old traditions, much more so than cities are. It's not that one is more important than the other, but rather that urban and rural characteristics co-exist in the same space.

*Your chapter titles stress the importance of family relationships and personal experiences in a way which echoes the stories you wrote for the acted characters in 24 City. How do you see the relationships between lived experiences and larger socio-political developments in China?*

The film is divided into 18 chapters, a quasi-musical structure of a kind that classic Chinese novels also often used. I can classify them like this. First, each of the four featured writers is given his or her own chapter. Liang Hong's chapter, towards the end, is extended in three more chapters of – 'Mother', 'Father' and 'Son' – which cover the basic family relationship in human society. The other chapter titles refer to common life issues which confront every one of us: 'Eating', 'Love', 'Disease' and so on. My main interest in the film is not simply to reveal larger socio-political developments, but to understand how these changes have affected individuals. Individual experiences, especially detailed descriptions of individual memories, are crucial for understanding history. Only by exploring them can I feel that I have truly made inroads into history.

*In many countries, literary culture has declined in the age of the internet and social media, and China is clearly no different. For you, does literature remain as relevant as ever?*

We have a population of 1.4 billion, but any serious novel which sells 30,000 copies is considered a best seller. That statistic, though, hasn't dented writers' passion for writing. There are exciting new works and emerging new writers every year. The general public likes sharing information on social media and is happy being surrounded by fragments of information. And that makes literature all the more important, because great literature reflects more analytic thought and presents its vision with both social and historical dimensions. Literature allows readers to experience life through vivid depictions. Storytelling and understanding are intimately related: the process of reading is also the process of understanding.

*People often speak of literature and cinema as opposites, although some of the writers here have had their work adapted for films. You don't go into the differences between the written work and film, although you do use brief clips from your earlier films to show how places have changed in the last 20 years. How do you see the connections between literature and cinema?*

My film *Platform* opens with a group of peasants chatting and smoking in front of a wall painting outside a village theatre in 1979. We shot that scene in Jia Family Village; the painting on the theatre wall was called 'Plan for the New Village'. We returned to Jia Family Village for *Swimming Out*, hoping to find the old painting. But it was gone. Later, we found a new painting in the Village History Museum. It was another plan, but it showed high-rise buildings and electronic communication technologies, none of which appeared on the old one. When I saw tourists taking photos of it on their iPhones, I reflected how different the people in *Platform* were. I cut together shots of both wall paintings in *Swimming Out*, the one from *Platform* in 1979 and the new one, and the changes of the last 40 years are immediately apparent and clear. Some feelings can be triggered only by moving images, while others are triggered by the written word.

## **Jia Zhangke interviewed by Tony Rayns, production notes**

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### **SWIMMING OUT TILL THE SEA TURNS BLUE**

*Director:* Jia Zhangke

*Production Companies:* Xstream Pictures (Shanxi), Huaxia Film Distribution Co., Ltd.

*In co-production with:* Shanghai Film Studio, Shanxi Film and Television Group, Huaxin Kylin Culture Media Co., Ltd., Wishart Media Co., Ltd., Huayi Brother Pictures Limited, Shi Dian (Tianjin) Culture Communication Co., Ltd., We Entertainment Iqiyi Pictures (Beijing) Co., Ltd., Alibaba Pictures (Beijing) Co., Ltd.

*Producer:* Zhao Tao

*Written by:* Jia Zhangke, Wan Jiahuan

*Director of Photography:* Yu Lik-Wai

*Editing:* Kong Jing-Lei

*Sound Mixing:* Zhang Yang

China 2020

112 mins

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