

hip flicks for sinophiles

21st century Chinese cinema

In the late 1960s and 70s, red ballets and operas dominated the Chinese screen. Mao died in 1976: a new age of cinema emerged with the founding of the Beijing Film Academy in 1978. Expressing new confidence in both historical and contemporary themes, young film-makers like Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige brought Chinese film to a global audience with masterpieces such as *Red Sorghum* (1987) and *Farewell my Concubine* (1993). Martin Scorsese named Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Horse Thief* (1986) as his favourite film of the 1990s (when it was released in the US). But many of these films encountered stigma at home.

Growing commercialisation and globalisation since the 1980s and 90s have driven Chinese cinema to explore new modes of both cinematography and moneymaking, leading to exploratory films at home in Western arthouse cinemas, and entertaining movies that have drawn huge crowds in China.

In this modest selection, we set the scene with a film that shaped the vision of China's 21st century filmmakers. Tian Zhuangzhuang's restrained criticism of 1950s and 60s state policies in *The Blue Kite* (1992) led to his blacklisting by the Party, but did not preclude him for mentoring the next generation of filmmakers.

We then showcase a selection of remarkable 21st century films that have won world-wide acclaim for China's talented directors and actors.

Our selection finishes with a couple of rollicking tales that have attracted the popular domestic audience: a grand epic: *Red Cliff* (2008), known better for its cavalry charges than its character development, and *Lost in Thailand* (2012) that, airily suspending social comment and political tension, was the biggest ever box office success in China.

blue kite

蓝风筝 lan fengzheng

directed by Tian Zhuangzhuang 田壮壮 1993

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles



We set the scene with Tian Zhuangzhuang's epic treatment of the destruction of family life in the totalitarian era. Even Tian's mother, renowned actress Yu Lan, could only smile mutely and shake her head when the film was mentioned six years after its production. It is still banned in China.





Action centres on a boy who loses three fathers to the vagaries of Chinese history; his mother is separated from him for much of his youth. The kite of the title betokens freedom, denied the boy and others like him whose existences are stamped by impersonal and unfeeling historical forces.

devils on the doorstep

鬼子来了 guizi laile

directed by Jiang Wen 姜文 2000

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



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chinese subtitles

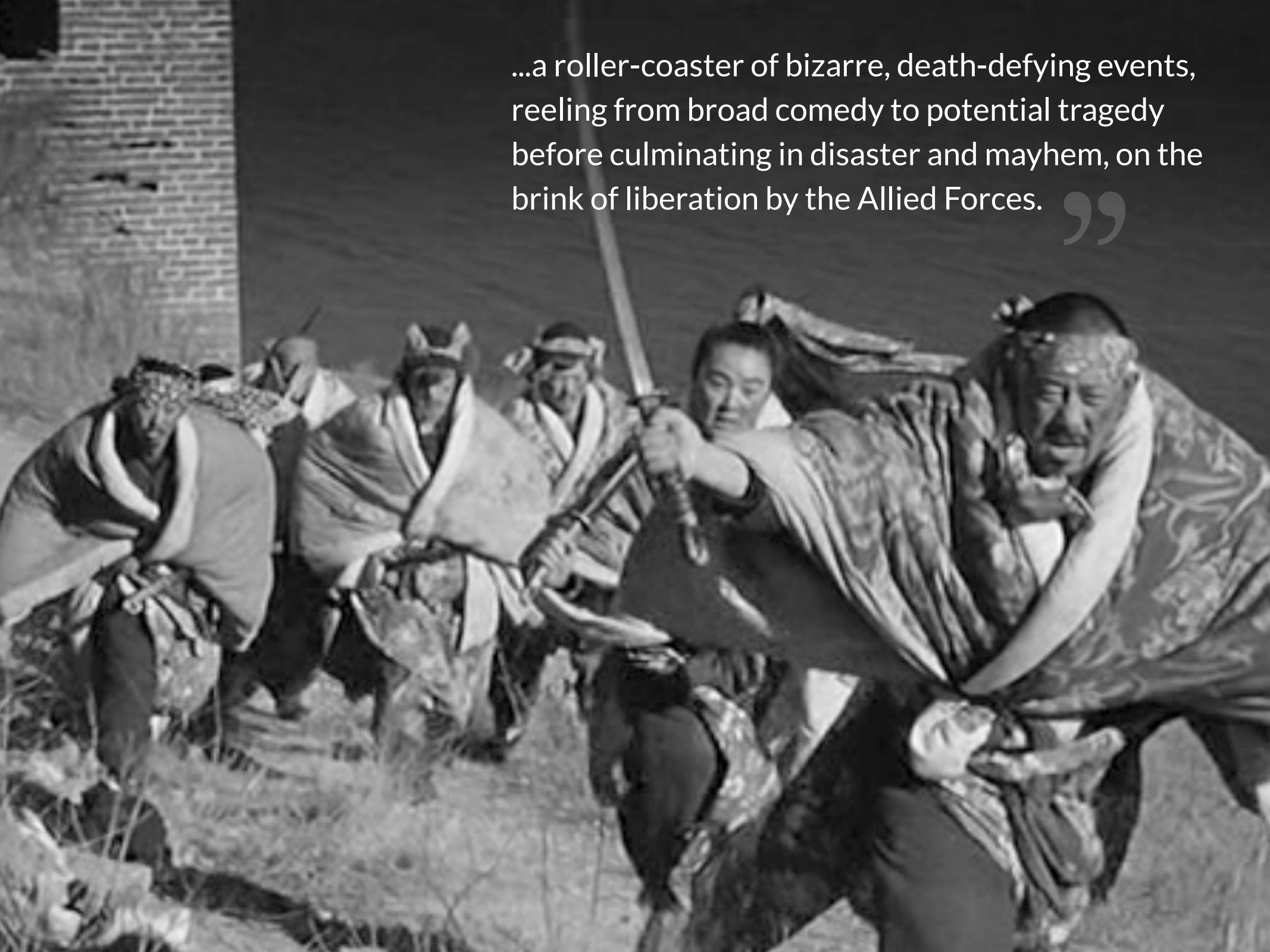


21st century Chinese cinema began by flouting the taboo on depicting the realities of life in wartime China. Jiang Wen's drama explores the predicament of a Chinese village under Japanese occupation in World War II.



...a roller-coaster of bizarre, death-defying events,
reeling from broad comedy to potential tragedy
before culminating in disaster and mayhem, on the
brink of liberation by the Allied Forces.

”



suzhou river

苏州河 suzhou he

directed by Lou Ye 娄烨 2000

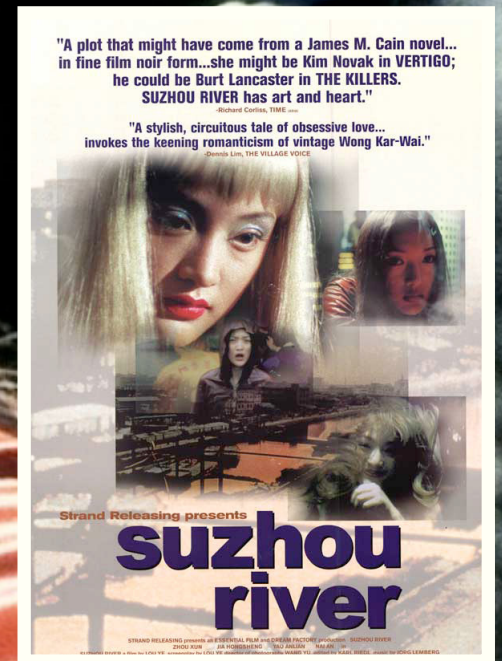
VIEW TRAILER
french subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
no subtitles



...diverges from traditional formal narrative in its discordant opening images of Shanghai's Suzhou Creek, the cameraman-narrator drifting along where 'a century's worth of stories and rubbish make it the filthiest river', with a landscape of dissolving architecture...





The film remains a mainland gem, a diamond in the rough, glittering with a host of images that shimmer away in the river's muck.

”



The people living along the river are his subject, vagabonds in their own city, drifters who are going nowhere. The images are almost pixelated, jagged in their constant turmoil, the dispossessed moving amidst the city of iconic wealth.

beijing bicycle

十七岁的单车 shiqisui de danche

directed by Wang Xiaoshuai 王小帅 2001

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
chinese subtitles



Another saga of youth in an unfeeling world, this film describes the experience of a rural-urban migrant teenager.

Despite the empathy and determination of the key protagonist, his trajectory is dismal, lurching from hope to disillusion, from resilience to dejection.





Arguing over a stolen bicycle might not be an unusual teenage experience, but here it becomes the lightning rod of violence, and the annihilation of hope. For one boy it's about schoolboy jealousy, and adolescent sexual rivalry, for the other it's about the ways and means of survival.

But the film treads lightly: its vulnerable young men and restraint allows for visceral and riveting sequences.

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blind shaft

盲井 Mangjing

Directed by Li Yang 李杨 2004

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
chinese subtitles



Li Yang's tale of China's scattered private-enterprise coal mines could not fail to provoke the censors. Two miners have developed a cruel money-making scam, in which they recruit raw youth from the mass of vulnerable jobless around the northwest mining areas.



Li Yang's first feature film grasps the nettle of China's most intractable problem, a rise to prosperity powered by countless cowboy mines and their uncontrolled pollution. ”



the world

世界 shijie

directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 2004

VIEW TRAILER
spanish subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles



Director Jia Zhangke is another maverick film-maker. Starting out with low-budget movies about drifters in Beijing's lower depths, he gained the attention of the film world with his three-hour *Platform* (2000), following the lives of four friends starting out in a revolutionary theatre troupe in 1979 in Jia's native Fenyang, Shanxi.



China's transformation and the expectations of youth achieved epic scale with *The World*.

Set in Beijing's 'World Park' where people wander among small scale replicas of famous sites... The film focuses on the young women and men who staff the theme park, as they fall in and out of love, and explore their dreams and frustrations, amid the growing towers of the city's building boom.



This sombre vision of globalised 21st century China established Jia as an incisive chronicler of the fragile balance between hope and despair that underlies the official dream.

”



kekexili mountain patrol

可可西里 kekexili

directed by Lu Chuan 陆川 2004

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles



Lu Chuan's early feature, *Kekexili*, is a 'true story' set in Tibet tracking wildlife preservation patrols as they hunt poachers preying on the endangered Tibetan antelope. The film is set in a spectacular landscape rarely captured on film.



The poachers are often local impoverished peasants; the more controversial issues of Tibet's place within China are elided, but echo in the background.

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peacock

孔雀 kongque

directed by Gu Changwei 顾长卫 2005

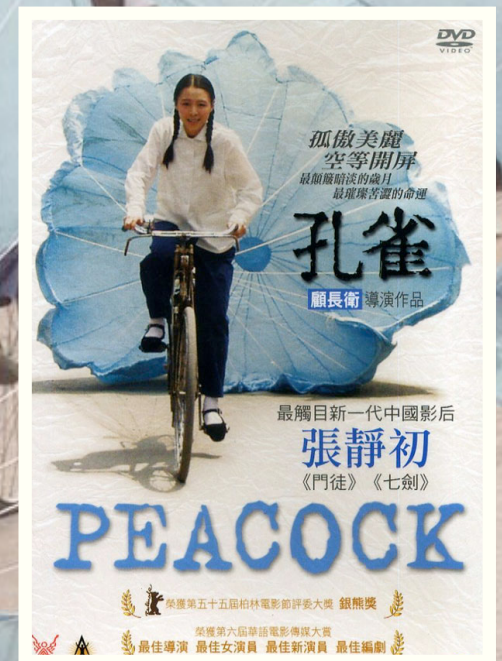
VIEW TRAILER
chinese subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles



Cinematographer Gu Changwei finally got to make his own feature, a tale of a family in an industrial town in Henan province. The two brothers and elder sister experience the 1970's end-of-Mao era, through to the 1980's and the first intimations of change.



In this, the last generation before the single-child policy, the story of each sibling is told in turn, folding back each time to the basic image of the family at a moment of stasis, before the siblings' dreams start tearing them all apart.



No other Chinese film
succeeds as well in
drawing out the inner
urge to forge a better
life than that which
came before. ”



still life

三峡好人 sanxia haoren

directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 2006

VIEW TRAILER
french subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
chinese subtitles



Jia followed *The World* with another penetrating look at the aftermath of China's industrial gigantism, this time set in the shadow of the Three Gorges dam, where the waters of the Yangtze rise to blot out entire communities as they enter the afterlife of relocation.





Two lost souls arrive in quest of things past: a Shaanxi worker, searching for a daughter taken away in her infancy by his estranged wife, and a woman looking for her departed husband, to sign him to a divorce.

This is a combination of story and essay, about individuals and state, the grand projects of Man, as against the conflicted desires of men and women in their daily lives. ”



summer palace

颐和园 yiheyuan

directed by Lou Ye 娄烨 2006

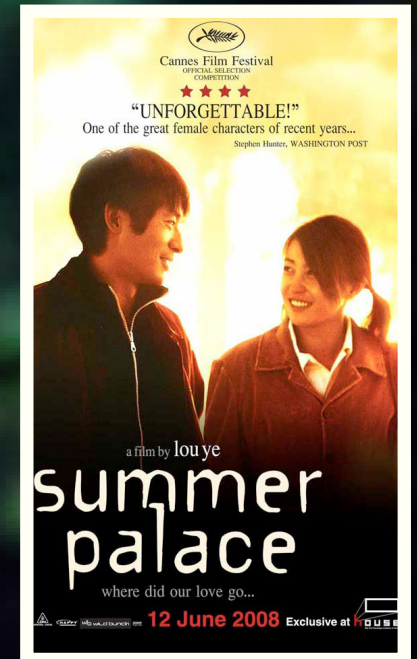
VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles




WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles



Lou Ye followed up his earlier *Suzhou River* with a bold tale set in 1989's upheaval in Beijing. Yu Hong, from the northern town of Tumen, enrolls at Peking University. The city's vibrant student life give her new opportunities for both intellectual and sexual freedom.



A still from the movie 'The Farewell' featuring John Cho and Awkwafena. They are shown from the chest up, with the man on the left and the woman on the right. The man has a serious, contemplative expression, looking slightly to the left. The woman is leaning her head against his shoulder, looking down with a sad or pensive expression. They are both wearing dark jackets over light-colored shirts. The background is a soft-focus outdoor setting with trees and foliage. The lighting is natural, suggesting daytime.

She falls in love at a time when student demonstrations spread towards the great hub of Tiananmen. The moment ends in tragedy; Lou Ye follows Yu Hong, her boyfriend Zhou Wei and best friend Li Ti as their lives diverge... ”

Lou Ye threw caution to the winds in this intense and often rambling vision of youth's narrowed choices. If the censor's ire was inevitable in the taboo background, the director filled his foreground with sexual scenes, giving no quarter to expectations of conventional camera moves or cutting.



city of life and death

南京！ 南京！ nanjing! nanjing!

directed by Lu Chuan 陆川 2009

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles



Lu's subsequent film, *City of Life and Death*, is a big budget production depicting the 1937 Nanjing massacre by Japanese troops.





As the Chinese defenders of the city retreat, the Japanese impose a pitiless occupation involving mass executions of prisoners-of-war and local inhabitants, and capturing the city's women as sex slaves.

The portrayal of a humanised
Japanese soldier amid the
horror of the massacre was
controversial...

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aftershock

唐山大地震 tangshan dadizhen

directed by Feng Xiaogang 冯小刚 2010

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles

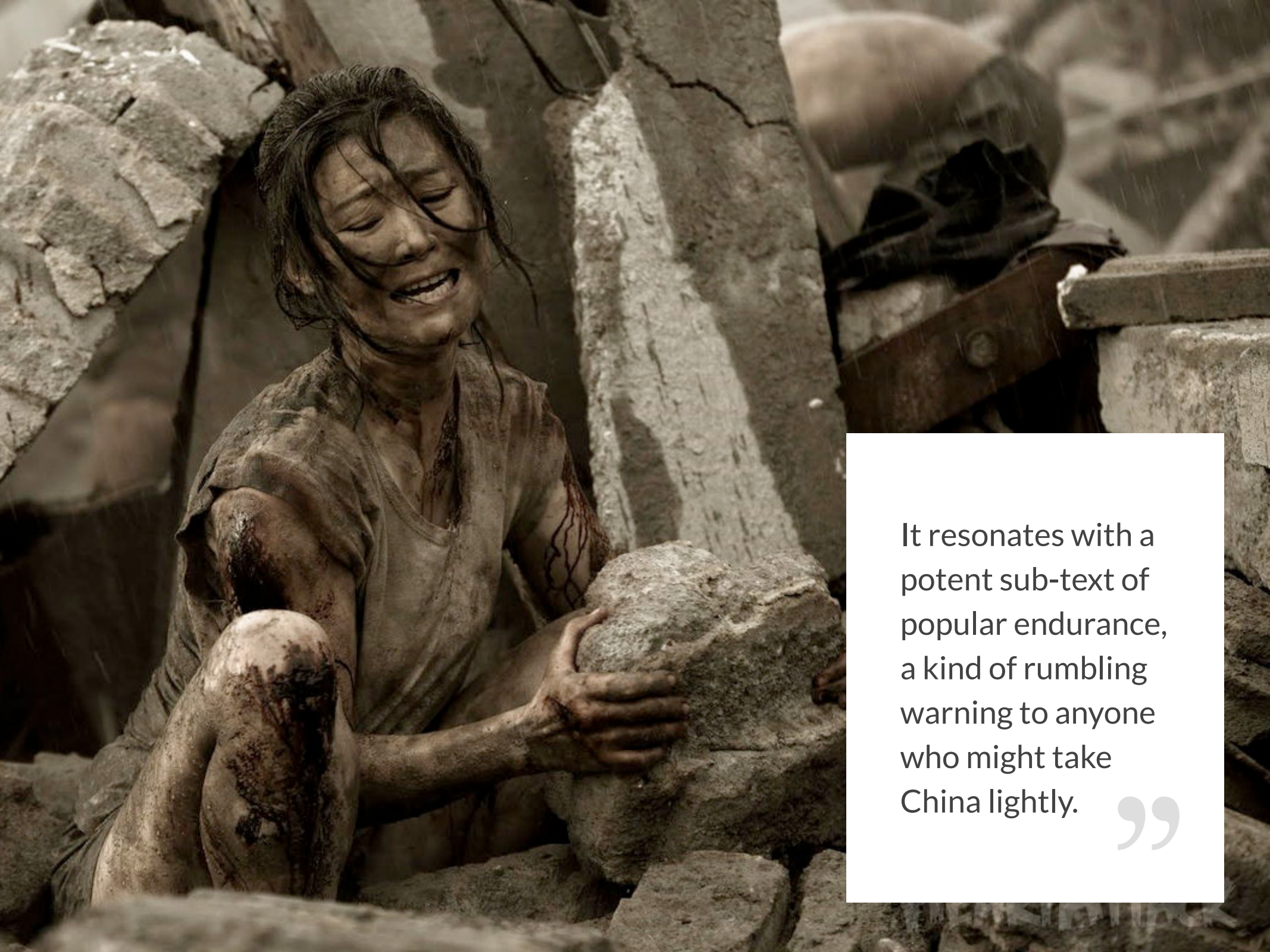


A highly successful director of dramas and comedies since the 1990s, Feng Xiaogan, directed this big-budget picture in 2010. With casualties estimated above 600,000, the Tangshan earthquake of 1976 was China's deadliest in 20th century.





The film follows the ordeal of a married woman, Li Yuanni, whose house collapses, killing her husband and trapping her two small children. She is faced with a mother's worst dilemma, having to decide which child the rescuers can lift from a fallen wall, when any effort will doom one.



It resonates with a potent sub-text of popular endurance, a kind of rumbling warning to anyone who might take China lightly.

”

a touch of sin

天注定 tianzhuding

directed by Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 2013

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles



With *The World* and *Still Life*, *A Touch of Sin* forms a trilogy of ironic comment on the era of social harmony. With Jia in forensic mode the film clinically displays the evaporation of moral norms. Four stories merge *Pulp Fiction* like; individuals are left with self harm as the only road to redemption.



A lone motorcyclist rushes through a mountainous landscape, shooting dead two hapless would-be robbers. A rebellious ex-miner explodes with resentment at the local boss who robs his workers to fund his lavish private-plane lifestyle. A woman who is beaten up by the relatives of her married lover comes to the end of her tether in her job at a sauna when abusive clients try to rape her. A young man seeks a job in a Mao-themed brothel, but ends up as a Shenzhen factory worker where robotic work culminates in tragedy.





Banned but feted, this seems an appropriate place for Jia, his film documenting the culmination of officially imposed harmony in murderous rage.

”

red cliff

赤壁 chibi

directed by John Woo 吴宇森 **2008**

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles



The Battle of Red Cliff was fought in 208 AD by Sun Quan and Liu Bei to stop Cao Cao and his numerically superior forces from taking lands south of the Yangtze River and uniting the Eastern Han dynasty. Fought on an enormous scale, between 250,000 and 800,000 troops were involved.



Cut into two showings each running over two hours, Red Cliff is a war epic in the truest sense

Paying homage to the Hong Kong-style action scenes in which John Woo cut his teeth, the spectacular Red Cliff marks Woo's directorial return to China.





Asia's most expensive film ever, the scale of Red Cliff's awe-inspiring battle scenes, in which legions of infantrymen, hordes of cavalry and swarms of battleships come together in intense, frenzied action, carries the day.

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lost in thailand

人再囧途之泰囧 ren zai jiongtu zhi taijiong

directed by Xu Zheng 徐峥 2012

VIEW TRAILER
english subtitles



WATCH MOVIE
english subtitles



Many of our choices are works of art as well as entertainment, more at home in an art house cinema than a multiplex, Lost in Thailand is something else again.



This slapstick chase through Thailand, littered with buffoonery and tethered to a simple moral about rethinking priorities, smashed box office records in Chinese cinemas. It is an entertaining, laugh-out-loud comedy that allows the audience to forget the stresses of daily life for an hour and a half.



Produced with a budget of just \$2.2 million, grossing \$208 million, it did better at the box office than any film ever released in China.

Little concerned about sexual innuendo, the film censor spared *Lost in Thailand* the scissors; it enjoyed a wide release.

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*That's All
Folks!*



23 December 2014

China Policy hopes you have time for a little aesthetic nourishment in the festive season...

special thanks to lead author **Simon Louvish***, our inspiration in presenting this brief sample of films. His masterful insight into the medium brings new Chinese cinema to the attention of a world audience. Thanks also to film scholar **Stephanie Hemelryk Donald** for deft guidance through this rugged terrain



*SIMON LOUVISH is a London based author of novels, including the six-part 'Blok Saga', a satirical chronicle of Middle East follies, and of several movie biographies of Hollywood comedians, including the Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy and Chaplin. He teaches at the London Film School, often screening the best of Chinese cinema