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MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART

A film by JIA ZHANGKE

2015 Cannes Film Festival
2015 Toronto International Film Festival
2015 New York Film Festival

China, Japan, France | 131 minutes | 2015

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Synopsis

China, 1999. In Fenyang, childhood friends Liangzi, a coal miner, and Zhang, the owner of a gas station, are both in love with Tao, the town beauty. Tao eventually marries the wealthier Zhang and they have a son he names Dollar.

2014. Tao is divorced and her son emigrates to Australia with his business magnate father.

Australia, 2025. 19-year-old Dollar no longer speaks Chinese and can barely communicate with his now bankrupt father. All that he remembers of his mother is her name....

Director's Statement

It's because I've experienced my share of ups and downs in life that I wanted to make *Mountains May Depart*. This film spans the past, the present and the future, going from 1999 to 2014 and then to 2025.

China's economic development began to skyrocket in the 1990s. Living in this surreal economic environment has inevitably changed the ways that people deal with their emotions. The impulse behind this film is to examine the effect of putting financial considerations ahead of emotional relationships. If we imagine a point ten years into our future, how will we look back on what's happening today? And how will we understand "freedom"?

Buddhist thought sees four stages in the flow of life: birth, old age, sickness, and death. I think the ultimate point of this film is to say: Whatever times we live through, none of us can avoid experiencing those stages, those difficult moments. *Mountains may depart, relationships may endure.*

-Jia Zhangke, April 2015



Interview with Jia Zhangke

You've often focused on China's rapid social and economic changes, and in Platform you followed your characters across a decade. How has your thinking about these issues evolved? And how did you come to the three-part "Past-Present-Future" structure of this film?

I am 45 years-old now, which means I've accumulated plenty of memories but still have plenty to look forward to. I'm standing at this mid-point in life, observing the present, remembering the past and imagining the future. After *A Touch of Sin* I felt an urgent need to make a film about emotions. Chinese society today is very focused on wealth creation, in sync with the rapid economic developments. And the new technologies which economic development has brought us, such as the internet and high-speed trains, are also changing the ways we feel and express our emotions.

I often find myself wondering if I'll feel regretful about this moment when I'm ten years older. Life is a one-time thing for all of us. Each generation has to face the age-old problems as brand-new issues. In recent years, emigration has become a hot issue in China. Many young couples choose to take their children abroad for a better life and education. Two years ago, I traveled with *A Touch of Sin* to countries like the USA, Canada and Australia, I made contact with many émigré Chinese families, especially the ones from Shanxi. I was startled to see how younger Chinese emigres live their lives. Many of them don't speak the Shanxi dialect, some don't speak Chinese at all. A language barrier has appeared, disrupting communication between parents and children. Is this the kind of family relationships we want?

The fateful decision that sparks the film's story is Tao's choice of Zhang Jinsheng rather than Liangzi as her husband. Practically, her choice makes good sense. But it proves very damaging at the emotional level, for all concerned. How do you see her choice?

Tao faces two tough decisions in the story. One is her choice of husband and the other is giving up custody of her son to her ex-husband. I think her choice of partner is primarily emotional. Zhang Jinsheng obviously expresses his feelings better than his rival; he's a man of action and more romantic than the miner Liangzi. In a young woman's eyes, such qualities may be attractive enough. And Zhang Jinsheng's financial prospects definitely play a part in her choice. For example he owns a car, which immediately brings her closer to modern freedoms. They can drive to the Yellow River to see fireworks. So I do not rule out the material temptation in love. But I think the harder decision lies in the

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'2014' chapter when she has divorced Zhang Jinsheng and agreed that her son can live with him. In a sense she's being pragmatic about this. As a mother, she must have wished to keep her child. At the same time she knows that she'll go on living in an area where there are few resources and opportunities, while Zhang Jinsheng has already moved to Shanghai, the country's financial capital. The material considerations seem paramount. For instance, Zhang's wealth pays for Dollar to go to an international school, where he can learn English before going abroad. But this very choice guarantees Tao's loneliness in 2025. It's in her fifties in 2025, she must have second thoughts about her choice, not only because she hasn't seen her son for more than a decade but also because the boy grows up in Australia and lacks a mother's love. *Mountains May Depart* does not end with a mother-and-son union, but the audience may imagine what Tao and Dollar would have to say to each other if they did meet again.

There's no real science-fiction aspect to the chapter set in 2025, but it does contain some interesting predictions, such as transparent tablet devices and the triumph of vinyl records over CDs. How much did you think about future trends and technology? And why did you choose Australia?

Is 2025 that far from us? Not really. It's only a decade away. I told myself at the outset that this would not be sci-fi, but a film depicting people's emotional lives in the near future. As now, people in 2025 will probably pretty much rely on the internet for information and communication. Our art director is a big fan of devices like tablets and smartphones, and he collects futuristic conceptual designs. We came up with the idea of transparent digital devices together, on the basis of those concepts. I know about the back-to-vinyl trend, but vinyl records are basically a reminder of the past for me. They disappeared from most people's lives. Young people mostly download music to their mobiles and computers from the internet. It seems that sales of records as physical objects won't last much longer, but I believe that vinyl record albums will stick around in 2025, just like paper books. There's a line in *Mountains May Depart*: "some things cannot be destroyed by time."

I actually thought of setting the '2025' chapter in North America, in a city like Vancouver, Toronto or New York with a large Chinese-immigrant community. I opted for Australia because it's in the southern hemisphere. Even though it only takes eight hours to fly from Shanghai to Perth, on Australia's west coast, it is still the other side of the planet. The hot summer down-under coincides with China's deep winter. The huge contrast in seasons gives me a feeling of great distance. The film's characters exile themselves to a place towards the end of the sky, and it feels almost impossible that they can never return.



Like the beginning and ending of *A Touch of Sin*, this story takes you back to Shanxi- specifically to Fenyang, the town where you were born. Aside from your personal feelings for the place, do you see Fenyang as a kind of microcosm of China in the 21st century?

From my first films *Xiao Wu* and *Platform* to *A Touch of Sin*, my hometown Fenyang has always had special resonances in my films. But there's a different specific reason each time I shoot there. When I set *Xiao Wu* there, I saw Fenyang as a small inland city going through transformation. You could take it as a microcosm of all cities in China longing for development and opening-up. Most Chinese people were living in cities like that. And although it's located in the basin of the Yellow River, the cradle of Chinese civilization, few filmmakers had ever shot there.

When it came to *A Touch of Sin*, there were other reasons as well. Shanxi has a large number of ancient buildings which are still now part of everyday life. The stories in *A Touch of Sin* remind me of the stories in the classical novel *The Water Margin*, also known as *Outlaws of the Marsh*. When we see modern people surrounded by ancient buildings, it helps me bring out a precise theme: violence is an age-old problem that's been with us since the start. For me, Fenyang's visual appearance almost subliminally maps the classical novel onto the film's stories. Choosing Fenyang again for *Mountains May Depart* springs first and foremost from a deep nostalgia. I have lived in Beijing ever since I left Shanxi many years ago, and I've made only short return visits since then. When I began thinking about a story that would start in 1999, I found myself recalling friends from Fenyang, people I'd known before I moved to Beijing, wondering what they'd made of their lives. From the very start I conceived *Mountains May Depart* as a film about 'love and relationships'. In China, we generally put those two words together in the word *qingyi*: loyalty and obligation. In Shanxi, though, we've tended to distinguish between *qing* and *yi*: for us, *yi* has more to do with commitment and responsibility. Even when people grow apart over time, *yi* of some kind can still exist. In *Mountains May Depart* Liangzi gets sick, returns to Fenyang and asks for help from Tao to pay for his medical treatment. Tao visits his old home and comes through with friendship and the time they spent together still endures. That's *yi*. In Shanxi we have a historical exemplar of the spirit of *yi* in the marquis Guan Yu, who appears as a key figure in the classical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In recent times, the traditional concept of *yi* has morphed into *guanxi*. I find myself really missing the days when I lived in Shanxi- the days when *qing* and *yi* had richer meanings.

As usual in your films, there are several recurring motifs- notably the ones which provoke Dollar's feelings of *deja-vu*. Why do you like to embed such motifs in your storylines?

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After Dollar's argument with his father, he sees a middle-aged man carrying a halberd (also known as a Guangong broadsword) by the seaside. That halberd is the symbol of Guan Yu. It may be a strange thing for Dollar to see. What he doesn't know is that his mother saw the same thing in 1999, when a ten-year-old kid crossed the street carrying one. And Liangzi saw one too, in 2014 in Handan, Hebei Province, when a young man walked through the mining camp carrying one. Each of us has different memories, but our lives are actually defined by broad similarities. For me, this kind of repetition also connotes a mysterious kind of *guanxi*. Sally Yeh's Cantonese song *Take Care* appears several times in the film. When Dollar hears it in Mia's Chinese class (in the '2025' chapter), we can't be sure if he remembers that his mother played the same song to him on the train back to Shanghai when he was a seven-year-old boy. Maybe he does remember at some unconscious level. His *deja-vu* moment in the car with the sunglasses is a similar case.

Each chapter of the film is shot in a different screen ratio. What do the screen ratios connote to you?

There are three different screen ratios in *Mountains May Depart*: 1.33:1 for the 1999 chapter, 1.85:1 for the 2014 chapter and 2.39:1 for the 2025 chapter. I didn't plan this in advance. In the 90s, I owned a DV camera which shot images in the 1.33:1 ratio, what they used to call Academy ratio. Yu Lik-Wai and I often went out with it and shot things that caught our eye, aimlessly. We accumulated a huge amount of video footage. More recently we've still sometimes done that, but with an Alexa camera, and we shoot in the 1.85:1 ratio.

When I look back at the mass of random footage, I tend to be intrigued by the people in it; I wonder how they're getting on now, what they're doing. I wanted to use a little of that footage in *Mountains May Depart*, mostly because the images document the moment they were shot in a way that cannot be reproduced. The images capture something of the times, the emotions, the values and the cultural tastes, even our physical characteristics. So, in the '1999' chapter, I used shots of the Fenyang Spring Festival Gala, shots of people dancing in the disco and the shot of the truck which almost overturns, all of them films in the 1990s in 1.33:1 ratio. Similarly, I used images I shot myself of people lighting a fire in the wild and of the mining camp at sunset in the '2014' chapter, filmed in the 1.85:1 ratio. Since this vintage footage was already in two different screen ratios, I thought the film should be in a different ratio for each time period.

Is there any special thinking behind the choice of Village People's "Go West" (performed by the Pet Shop Boys) as the film's disco anthem? And who is the guy seen carrying the halberd?

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In some notes that I gave to Zhao Tao before the shoot, I explained that she would have to play a character from her youth to fifty years old. To me, that span represents the distance between an explosion of energy and an ocean of tranquility. As it happens, the late 1990s was when disco achieved peak popularity in China. Many went out to dance in clubs on the weekends because it gave them a chance to break out of their personal limits; Chinese people tend to be repressed, shy and introverted! Back then I also enjoyed hanging out in discos, and “Go West” was one of the most exciting golden records for us. My memory is heavily dependent on music. More importantly, music endows me with imagination. The person carrying the Guangong Broadsword is seen at three different ages. We could think of him first as a teenager learning martial arts, then as an adult artist and finally as an émigré in Australia. But we might also see him as a god roaming the crowded earth. He might even be Guan Yu.

Interview by Tony Rayns (April 2015)



Interview with Zhao Tao

This is the first time you've had to play a character across a 26-year time span. What are the challenges and problems in doing that?

When Jia Zhangke decided to shoot *Mountains May Depart* last year, he told me that the story would cover 26 years, and that I'd have to play a woman who ages from her twenties to her fifties. I was excited by the challenge. I first worked with Jia Zhangke in 2000 on *Platform*, which tells the story of one generation's youth. Eleven years later I played an immigrant mother in *I Am Li* for the Italian director Andrea Segre. The emotional and physical experience of playing those two roles was a good preparation for playing Tao at different ages. Also, as I get older myself, I feel more confident about playing emotionally rich characters. 26 years is a long time, not only for us to experience emotions but also to rethink and understand our emotions. In the '1999' chapter, the most important thing for me was to find the right body language, the physical feelings of being young. Young women like Tao can be impetuous and very physical in their responses. For the second chapter, I learned a lot from observing my mother and her physical tempo. And for the scene and the end of the '2025' chapter, I borrowed some clothes from Jia Zhangke's mother- my mother-in-law- and slipped into character the moment I put them on.

The bigger challenge probably comes from Jia Zhangke's way of telling the story. He doesn't spell out specific reasons for a character's emotional changes, or even provide detailed back-story for the characters. The other actors and I need to fill in all those blanks from our own imaginations, and it has to look convincing in the film. My own way of dealing is embarrassingly straightforward: I write down whatever occurs to me while reading the script. Thorough preparation makes me feel better equipped when I'm acting.

Tao's choice of Jinsheng over Liangzi is the fateful moment which sparks the film's storyline. What do you think about the character's choice?

If I'd been Tao in 1999, I would have chosen Jinsheng. Not only because, as a rising nouveau riche, he can offer her material wealth but also because he cares for her spirit as well as her immediate prosperity. There's a Hong Kong song she likes; Jinsheng rushes out to get the CD for her. He's actions, not words. Tao is not some goddess high above but a living person. I fancied the same kind of people when I was her age in 1999. Back then there was no great wealth gap in China; none of us could have imagined that those born in similar circumstances would end up experiencing extremes of wealth and poverty. By 2014, Zhang Jinsheng has become a successful capitalist, a player of the stock market.

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Maybe that's why the marriage fell apart? When I was playing the young Tao in the '1999' chapter, I didn't think about Tao in the later chapters because she herself has no real sense of her future. Her focus was completely on the moment and how she felt in it.

The most painful thing for Tao must have been surrendering custody of her son to her ex-husband. It was probably the right thing to do; as she says in the film, she's not a very 'capable' person, and Dollar would have had fewer opportunities in life if he'd stayed with her in a small town. In a sense, she sacrifices her own happiness for the sake of her son's future. But she has no way of knowing that her decision will actually leave a huge gap in Dollar's life, will leave him emotionally empty and confused in 2025. It is heartbreaking. I quite like the ending of the film, the way Tao ends up living on her own. People are destined to be lonely. It probably echoes with what she says to Dollar, that nobody stays with you forever. We are all meant to separate in the end.

Tao chooses to stay in Fenyang after her divorce, and the film suggests that she will live out her days there, lost in her memories. Do you share Jia Zhangke's feelings for Shanxi and Fenyang?

I was born and raised in Taiyuan, Shanxi, not much more than 100 km from Fenyang. It's Shanxi's provincial capital, famous for its coal and steel. So Jia Zhangke and I share a similar cultural background. Jia Zhangke's script reveals what he thinks about traditional relationships in Shanxi, not to mention his deep love for the mountains, rivers and counties there. I completely understand and feel the same way spiritually. Even the sound we hear when winter wind blows in those places and the faces we see at county fairs keep telling us that our feelings for the place are irreplaceable. I recall that Jia Zhangke once joked with a reporter that he likes filming in Shanxi because he likes Shanxi people and finds them all pretty. Of course he was joking, but the title he chose for the film is Shan He Gu Ren (literally it means "Mountains and Rivers, Old Acquaintance". The "Mountains and Rivers" part refers to the landscape, "Old Acquaintance" refers to people. We love both the people and the place. I don't think viewers will find it hard to see these embedded feelings.

Interview by Tony Rayns (April 2015)



Writer/Director Biography: Jia Zhangke

He was born in Fenyang, Shanxi, in 1970 and graduated from Beijing Film Academy. His debut feature *Xiao Wu* won prizes in Berlin, Vancouver and elsewhere. Since then, his films have routinely premiered in the major European festivals. *Still Life* won the Golden Lion in Venice in 2006, and *A Touch of Sin* won the Best Screenplay prize in Cannes in 2013. Several of his films have blurred the line between fiction and documentary. He has also produced films by many young directors and has made cameo appearances in films for other directors. In 2015, Jia Zhangke returned to Cannes to receive the Carrosse d'Or Prize (Golden Coach) and his feature *Mountains May Depart* was selected in Competition.

Filmography

2015 *Mountains May Depart*

-in Competition, 68th Cannes International Film Festival

2013 *A Touch of Sin*

-Best Screenplay, 66th Cannes International Film Festival

2010 *I Wish I Knew*

-Un Certain Regard, 63rd Cannes International Film Festival

2008 *24 City*

-In Competition, 61st Cannes International Film Festival

2007 *Useless*

-Venice Horizons Documentary Award, 64th Venice International Film Festival

2006 *Still Life*

-Golden Lion Award, 63rd Venice International Film Festival

2006 *Dong*

-Horizon, 63rd Venice International Film Festival



2004 **The World**

-In Competition, 61st Venice International Film Festival

2002 **Unknown Pleasures**

-In Competition, 55th Cannes International Film Festival

2001 **In Public**

-Grand Prix, 13th International Documentary Film Festival of Marseilles

2000 **Platform**

-In Competition, 57th Venice International Film Festival

1998 **Xiao Wu**

-Wolfgang Staudte Award & Netpac Award, 48th Berlin International Film Festival

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Cast

Tao.....ZHAO TAO
Zhang Jinsheng.....ZHANG YI
Liangzi.....LIANG JIN DONG
Dollar.....DONG ZIJIAN
Mia.....SYLVIA CHANG
Liangzi's friend.....HAN SANMING

Crew

Written and Directed by.....JIA ZHANGKE
Produced by.....REN ZHONGLUN, JIA ZHANGKE, NATHANAEL KARMITZ,
LIU SHIYU, SHOZO ICHIYAMA
Music.....YOSHIHIRO HANNO
Production Director.....ZHANG DONG
First Assistant.....JUN WANG JIAN
Director of Photography.....YU LIK-WAI
Camera Operator.....TIAN LI
Assistant DOP.....WANG JIAN JUN
Editing.....MATTHIEU LACLAU
Sound.....ZHANG YANG
Sound Mixing.....OLIVIER GOINARD
Set Decorator.....LIU QIANG
Assistant Set Decorator.....WANG YONG
Costumes.....LI HUA
Make Up.....SHINJI HASHIMOTO