

# Shanghai 2012

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Fall 2012 Issue of KINEMA

## HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE SHANGHAI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2012

The Shanghai International Film Festival may be the most prominent film festival in Mainland China, but its potential is untapped. If bureaucratic and censorship barriers were eased, Shanghai would be positioned to reshape its A-list status beyond paper. At the very least the festival could correct its blind spots, such as crafting a richer program in lieu of sweeping mainstream content, and ideally launching a serious focus on Mainland and Sinosphere cinema. Still, Shanghai is a good stop on the calendar to sample state sanctioned Mainland films unlikely to see the theatrical light of day elsewhere. Of its range of contemporary world cinema, the festival's annual showcase of Japanese films has drawn consistently huge crowds. But in the interim audiences will be watching if the latest round of political tensions between China and Japan will result in cinema as collateral damage. Ten solid titles from this year's 15<sup>th</sup> edition were:

### ***Camel Caravan* (Gao Feng, China 2012)**

Set in Xinjiang during the years of the Chinese Republic, Gao Feng's coming-of-age tale is also a rousing adventure - a gunslinging Western with camels. Erga-zi (Zhang Yulong), an eager young orphan is raised by a stern patriarch (Liu Xiaoning) of camel herders who make their living transporting valuable goods across desert frontiers. Already a precocious archer, an opportunity to prove his maturity comes when the patriarch entrusts his daughter to him after their caravan detours on a dangerous expedition to elude corrupt government sheriffs. Beyond the drama, Gao's tale dutifully recalls the exploits of this once dominant community of folks.

### ***Detective Hunter Zhang* (Gao Qunshu, China 2012)**

Gao Qunshu portrays the rigours of law enforcement through the lives of undercover cops tasked to rid Beijing of confidence thieves, captained by the eponymous Zhang Huling (Zhang Lixian), a weary but honourable man of conscience. Based on true events but also inspired by the 1980s US television drama *Hunter*, from which its title derives, the film is an episodic patchwork of incidents and sting operations that typify the team's daily grind. Gao's stealthy directing and handheld camerawork invoke realism, while his amateur cast of non-thespian celebrities lends notable gravitas. Internationally the film uses the more prosaic title, *Beijing Blues*. (Best Director Award.)

### ***The Drudgery Train* (Yamashita Nobuhiro, Japan 2012)**

Adapted from Nishimura Kenta's eponymous 2011 novella, Yamashita Nobuhiro's latest film studies the relationship between two disparate men - just as his 2011 film, *My Back Page* did. While working as a dockside labourer, self-destructive high school dropout Kanta (Moriyama Mirai) consorts with fellow drifter Shoji (Kora Kengo), a more sensible peer. But their friendship is doomed: even as Kanta debauches Shoji, he fails to be inspired by his ambition. Slick production design and cinematography inform the tale's realist edge, while Yamashita elicits the best from Moriyama in particular, whose strength as a character actor makes him a talent to watch.

### ***Key of Life* (Uchida Kenji, Japan 2012)**

Uchida Kenji recharges the genre of identity mix-ups with this riotous comedy of errors. Jobless actor Sakurai (Sakai Masato) steals an amnesiac stranger's identity to quell his suicidal thoughts, but this forces brutish victim Kondo (Kagawa Teruyuki) to assume his destitution and start from scratch. The antics roll when Sakurai learns he has inherited Kondo's dangerous reputation as a hit man for hire after criminals start buzzing him for unfinished work. Smartly written and performed by an ensemble that includes Hirose Ryoko as Kondo's neurotic love interest, Uchida's newest feather in his cap is, like the others, fashioned to tickle.

### ***Life Back Then* (Zeze Takahisa, Japan 2011)**

A young man and woman damaged by adolescent traumas meet and bond as employees at a cleaning service that helps bereaved families tidy the homes where their loved ones died. Although this invisible vocation

furnishes a compelling metaphor for life after death, Kyohei (Okada Masaki) and Yuki (Eikura Nana) hold short of sharing the breadth of their pasts, knowing their devils would thwart the promise of deeper affection stirring between them. Anchored by charismatic turns from the two leads, pink film alumni Zeze Takahisa's remarkable contemporary drama commands a Japanese brand of poignancy that captures the transience of human relationships.

***Shadow Player* (Wang Zichen, China 2012)**

A practitioner of shadow puppetry savours his new projectionist job after the cinema arrives in his rural Hubei village, even as this sidelines the traditional art his father has left him. Although the advent of television renders projecting outmoded over the decades, his passion for the movies remains intact. Wang Zichen's tribute to the art of light and shadow may be couched in the vein of potboilers like *Cinema Paradiso* (1988) and *Electric Shadows* (2004), but his harvest of old vintage tastes less syrupy. Lead actor and co-producer Zhao Yong reportedly sold his house to finance this labour of love.

***Shanghai Calling* (Daniel Hsia, USA/China 2012)**

Daniel Hsia's charming debut features Daniel Henney as Sam, a Manhattan attorney who is grudgingly transplanted to Shanghai to oversee his firm's expansion but soon learns to love his adopted (and ancestral) home. Cultural differences sustain much of the film's delight, but a slice of China's rough-and-tumble business world is served for good measure. Hsia's screenplay and direction are exemplary, as are the supporting turns by Eliza Coupe as Sam's Sinophile love interest and Bill Paxton as an American expatriate leader, among others. Although a contemporary romantic comedy, at heart Hsia's work is richly layered with identity and political undertones.

***Unbowed* (Chung Ji-young, South Korea 2011)**

A satirical comedy on South Korea's blemished judiciary, veteran director Chung Ji-young crafts a stirring tale based on true events from 2007. After losing a wrongful dismissal suit, a mathematics professor stalks the presiding judge with a crossbow and is promptly charged with attempted murder. Prosecutors allege the judge was wounded but the defendant claims the injury was fabricated. Although aided by a buffoonish but humane lawyer, the professor is determined to challenge the litigation strictly on the letter of the law. Ahn Sung-ki invites much sympathy as the beleaguered defendant, while Park Won-sang is wacky as his hapless counsel.

***The Wings of the Kirin* (Doi Nobuhiro, Japan 2011)**

When an injured man crawls intently toward a Kirin statue atop Tokyo's historical Nihon Bridge before dying of stab wounds, stoic newcomer detective Kaga (Abe Hiroshi) is convinced the suspect found at the crime scene is innocent despite damning circumstantial evidence on him. Against his team's groupthink, Kaga's instinct chases a more complicated lead involving a hidden past and an ensuing exposition of guilt and sacrifice. Doi Nobuhiro's thrilling but over-plotted murder mystery is a feature film adaptation of *Shinzanmono*, a popular TV drama, which in turn is adapted from author Higashino Keigo's mystery novels featuring fictional detective, Kyoichiro Kaga.

***The Woodsman and the Rain* (Okita Shuichi, 2011)**

Okita Shuichi's low-key comedic drama centres on a relationship that only a movie could render warmhearted. While shooting a zombie film in hilly country, young director Koichi (Oguri Shun) loses his crew's confidence when his self-esteem crumbles, but is set straight by local lumberjack Katsu (Yakusho Koji), who has been invited to be an extra. Estranged from his idle son, the middle-aged widower soon finds himself being a paternal surrogate to Koichi while also taking an interest in his filmmaking. Yakusho's charismatic Katsu evokes striking parallels to the character he portrayed in his 2009 directorial debut, *Toad's Oil*.

## Author Information

Brandon WEE lives in Toronto. He has written for *Asia Pacific Arts* (Los Angeles), *Cineaste* (New York), *Cinema Scope* (Toronto), *Ricepaper* (Vancouver), and *Senses of Cinema* (Melbourne).



Figure 1: Sakai Masato in *Key of Life* by Uchida Kenji