

## Members *Return to Dust* feedback

One of the best films I have seen that has held my attention from start to finish. I was completely drawn into the story line and the characters. The film was beautiful shot and did not rely on music to enhance the storyline. The simple sounds of everyday life were enough. A sad but powerful film, beautiful portrayed.

I rate the film as Excellent, very thoughtful, the relationship between the two main characters was tender and lovingly portrayed. The film worked beautifully in a cinema setting on a TV screen it would lose some of its impact.

Excellent. Wonderful performances by the lead actors.

It had many admirable qualities: the compassionate description of the two principals and their mutual tenderness; the portrayal of their hard and skilful work, farming and building; the depiction of the countryside where they lived (reminiscent of at least one film shot in Ukraine in the 1930s, whose name I've been trying to remember for years); and the contrast between their humanity and the rather different natures of the other characters. The often slow pace should also have appealed. But I'm afraid I found it slow, soporific and uninviting; and consequently, far too long.

Excellent. Some beautiful photography, terrific acting and a very touching story of a couple finding love and some contentment (at times) amid grinding poverty in a society where they were treated with such a lack of empathy and even with cruelty by grasping family members.

Good. I thought the acting was excellent and I was enchanted by the couple and their relationship. I was really nervous that something bad was going to happen to them but was still shocked by the sudden death of the wife. I was then traumatised!

Excellent. Sedately paced and profoundly tender, without sentimentalising rural life. The stark ending packed a punch.

A good film - so slow so moving so poignant so long almost too relentless.

An astonishing film on every level. It was heartbreaking, beautiful and achingly tender. I felt angry, helpless and more than a little in love with Ma Youtie and Cao Guiyung's love story. The sparse dialogue cut the story back to the essence of their unexpected love allowing their actions to speak volumes. No wonder the film was banned in China as the brutal treatment of peasants was exposed.

I absolutely loved this film, so I'd give it an Excellent. I loved the message of the power of kindness and simplicity. And the colours and understated beauty. Close up shots of seedlings. Seed flowers pressed into skin and how you realise what's being shown just before it is made obvious; the way the story is allowed to quietly unfold. A really sweetly beautiful film. Thank you RFS.

A most enjoyable and touching storyline, kept me gripped throughout.

Interesting story, but overlong.

Excellent. A subtle and brilliant film. Almost every frame was like a painting. The colour and texture of the film made even the slowest scene completely captivating. The deceptively simple plot contained within it a beautiful story of gentleness, kindness and love. It captured the importance of ordinary everyday things, of growing plants, of eating hot buns, of catching and eating a fish. The building of a new home for his wife from mud bricks becomes a supreme act of love. In amongst it all, the film presents a powerful picture of China's left behind people. More films like this please!

What a rollercoaster for one's emotions. There was a sense of real pathos tinged with uplifting moments. In a slow moving albeit "busy" film there was a clear sense of the two "outcasts"/ overlooked main characters growing into their new relationship both with each other but also with nature. Neither protagonist complained despite having good reasons to do so. The film depicted protagonists who were decent moral people who communed with nature and simply got on with their lives despite repeated setbacks, mainly caused by other humans. However, the sense of loss with the death of his wife was too much to bear. They were a unit together but alone without each other. Wow.

I would have given an Excellent but it was a little too long for me.

It was a very sad film but it this does not detract from it. It was also a film of humour, quiet joy and truth. I was absorbed throughout and found it truly lovely.

Very moving.

Good film but so, so sad on many levels. Found it haunting yet beautiful. Can't say I 'enjoyed' it as 'enjoyed' would be the wrong word amongst such sadness but I am glad I had the experience. Minimal dialogue was very affecting and stunning photography. Such hard lives depicted without comment but the sorrow spoke for itself.

We would give this film a Good. Although it was long, it was thoroughly absorbing, with plenty of interesting contrasts between the four brother's and his wife's peasant way of life and the smart phones and Mercedes of his bullying brothers. The couple were so kind and tender with each other, scrupulously honest in their dealings with their (often unkind) neighbours and happily content with the simple life they managed to build for themselves. The ending was heartbreaking...why didn't the neighbours save her from the water? Why was he prevented from living in the house they had so painstakingly built? What became of the donkey?

I found *Return to Dust* visually stunning. Although it was long, I was gripped throughout and enjoyed seeing another side of China. The bond and love between the two protagonists were portrayed beautifully. Their story, one of hard graft and hard luck. I found it poignant but never sentimental; one or two tears rather more but it will stay with me for a long time.

Excellent from each of us. Utterly magnificent.

At the start I thought it was going to be too slow but after a while I tuned into it. This is such a moving and emotionally charged film. The main character and his wife are the only ones with a donkey and cart, all the other people have moved onto tractors. The donkey, its suffering at the hands of its first owner, the kindness the man shows it are a super metaphor. The man abandons it in the end and the life experienced is all abandoned, everything returns to dust. His relatives and villagers all display a recognisable and ignorant venality. All the man is given is the leftovers, an abused woman and together they find loving happiness in their circumstances. The

comment made by the relative about the apartment 'the kitchen is a bit small but the lounge is nice' displays a willingness to judge and criticise. Indeed, the culture of acquisition encourages such dissatisfaction. The man says no animals can live there. Even though he is only ever handed out discards he actually makes everything himself anyway! I loved this film!

I thought this was a long, slow, but really beautiful film, a heart-breaking love story without the word ever being mentioned. Stunning landscapes, beautiful acting by the two central characters - perhaps slightly more caricature by the others. I quite see why the Chinese government banned it, both for the heroic values attributed to a rapidly vanishing traditional way of life and the greedy insensitivity of the urban young materialising like aliens into a virtually medieval landscape. Worth every one of its many minutes

In itself not a bad film but taking the programme as a whole too similar to other films we have seen this season, specifically the Peruvian and Ethiopian offerings.

Too long and rather dull for me I'm afraid. Whilst the subtle signs of the couple's warming relationship was nicely observed, the overall gloom and hardship without any lightness were too much.

Absorbing, beautifully filmed and ironic that 'Panda Blood' was the most valuable commodity in the community.

Wrist-slashing sadness amid slow burning excellence - and this from someone who likes a good car chase. It's an Excellent from me

I would give *Return to Dust* a Good. I could understand why the Chinese government banned it. I love films that highlight the importance of appreciating our natural environment as well as showing what love, care and gratitude can contribute to having a happy and fulfilled life.

Very slow film but a careful look at peasant life in current day China – without being overly sentimental. There seems to be no clear explanation as to why it was banned in China but maybe due to the Level 1 and 2 members of the population still ignoring the rest..... who have a very harsh life indeed.

Absorbing and beautifully filmed. A real insight into life in rural China alongside the developing relationship between the characters.

How beautifully the story of this couple developed despite their families and acquaintances. loved the how natural life was captured: birds and their young, the donkey, the life- cycle of their produce, natural building materials, even the storm. Not sure if he moved or died, although the magical moments of the wheatears led me to my own conclusion. What an inspired and talented producer/director.

I enjoyed every minute, but I'm possibly slightly biased. I was a VSO volunteer in a northern Chinese province in the early 1990s, so the details of day-to-day village life were very recognisable. So interesting to see how much and yet how little has changed for poor rural communities in the last 30 years.

Lovely film but a bit long.

Beautiful and unexpected love story. The actors were impressive and the photography wonderful. As so many films and books, this one had gems and repetition. Banning the film must be the action of powerful people who contemplated the final demolition of the house as something brutal that they had done too.

I found the film very interesting as one doesn't see many set in China. I understand it was well received there before the censors pulled it! The portrayal of the couple was touching and humorous. I would have liked more background/ information about the policy of demolishing rural houses, which seemed very cruel - but maybe that would require a documentary.

Wonderful.

Very good choice – Excellent.

I didn't move for the entire two hours and eleven minutes but was totally exhausted by the end. A triumph!

This was an excellent film - beautifully shot and the acting was amazing - but I would echo some previous comments, that it would be great to have some more uplifting stories. I get so engaged with the characters!

The scene where Youtie is pressured into getting a flat in town, for the benefit of his relatives rang true given what we now know about financial corruption in the Chinese property sector. When he had to give blood at the hospital I kept wanting him to ask them to test his wife, he was smart enough, but he never did.

Excellent story and fabulous characters. I was totally caught up in the story and it did not seem over long. I enjoyed seeing the way of life of these peasant farmers and their complete self-reliance. However, I think I missed a lot of cultural references. I do not know enough about the Chinese cultures and politics that would have explained actions, events and the controversy it caused. Consequently, I was left bemused regarding what it was all about...

Delightful film.

I really enjoyed this gentle film. The developing relationship between Youtie and Guiying was very well portrayed by the well-cast actors. I particularly admired their respect for nature and their work ethic and was sorry that their house was 'returned to dust' by the government after the tragic death of Guiying.

A poignant film, very well acted. The happiness conveyed by the matched couple was well depicted. Also, the scrupulous honesty of the fourth brother, shown in marked contrast to some of the film's other characters. Finally, the controlling hand of the State was never far away.

At the beginning I thought oh no, not another depressing film! - misery, despair and incontinence! But then in the second half things began to pick up - the crops, the bricks, the building of the house, the donkey - until at the end, although things which had been built were destroyed - there was a greater understanding of the man.

A poignant and beautifully filmed love story.

Excellent, although a happy end would have been better.

The film is clearly intended for a Chinese audience. As possibly the only audience member who (in the course of 10 years living in China) has visited Gansu Province, I feel it might be helpful to add a few explanations, in the hope of enabling greater retrospective interpretation. Those RFS members who complain about films being long might perhaps consider that this one reflects the patterns of the rural year, which cannot convincingly be done in brief flashes. Seeing *Return to Dust* shortly after *Grapes of Wrath* (Director: John Ford) underlined through the energetic resilience of the “Okies” the passive, but resourceful, submissiveness of the Chinese; in Gansu, there was no dust bowl, but plenty of arable land. The unwillingness of the donkey to leave its master mirrors that submission. The plot contains numerous references which could be interpreted as in favour of the CCP’s policies of improving living standards in the countryside. That and the distance from Beijing (now 2-3 hours’ flight) may well have delayed the ban. The scenery: Gansu is a very long, N-S province in the north-west of China, including parts of the Tibetan Plateau and the Gobi Desert; it has borders with the state of Mongolia, plus Inner Mongolia and Xinjiang (Chinese “Autonomous Regions”) and other provinces. Its scenery is thus very varied; I have climbed striated sand dunes like the one in the film. Guiying, the name of the wife, means “hero” and recalls a warrior heroine in the Yang Saga (largely fictional) around the year 1000. Many Chinese given names have meanings: one of my students had chosen the English name “Small Rain” (a literal translation of the Chinese for drizzle), which was, she told me, the weather when she was born. Recalling the one-child family policy, viewers may have wondered at the references to “3rd and 4th brothers”. Because of its location along the Silk Road, Gansu has long had a sizeable selection of China’s 56 ethnic groups; in such remote and mixed areas, the policy was not applied. The Programme Notes rightly stated: “Although the language is reported as Mandarin, the Chinese speakers in our audience may notice its main dialogue is in fact in the rural Gansu dialect.” The repeated blood donation scenes had a clear symbolic meaning. Less clear may have been the references to pandas. Most animals in China have at least one use, not least being edible. Pandas play a role in Chinese international diplomacy; nationally, they are known for being decoratively useless, like the blood’s recipient: all they do is sleep, mate and eat a variety of bamboo only found in neighbouring Sichuan province. During the film, people are shown burning “paper money” for their ancestors. This practice is widespread in China and countries where Chinese is spoken: I have seen it in Manchuria, the opposite end of China. It usually takes place on “Tomb-Sweeping Festival” (Qingming), generally in early April, a public holiday in the PRC. The “paper money” is not current banknotes, but commercially produced imitations, with very high denominations.

Brilliant film.

A fascinating insight into life in rural China and the powerlessness of the marginalised community, combined with a moving story of a tender but fragile relationship. Marvellous acting - were they professionals?

It started slowly, very slowly, but I was gradually drawn into it. A tender love story between two of society's outcasts or near outcasts, they have no chance pitted against the sharp practitioners comprising China's burgeoning money class. This really was a case of love or money and there was only going to be one winner here. Youtie, despite being illiterate, shows himself adept at turning his hand to most practical things but is clueless about the ways of the world. He is kind to his wife and animals and is content with the little he has but when the house he himself built, suddenly comes into its own as an asset, that is the end of that particular idyll. The kindness he and his wife show, is not to be found by his and Cao Guying's respective families, or most of the other villagers, who let her languish in the canal after she falls into it. According to Wikipedia, there are strong indications that he commits suicide in order to be near Cao Guying, a reference

I missed and it is not clear whether he goes to live in the flat before his house is demolished or not. The final image of the donkey, returning to its home, out of sheer loneliness, is the final indictment of a society which knows the price of everything and the value of nothing. A sleeper hit, the depiction of rural poverty in this film is not the image of modern China that the Communist Party would like the world or even its own citizens to see. It is no surprise it was (belatedly) banned.

Still, on this second viewing, such a powerful and touching and tragic film not without its gentle humour in places. Fantastic framing and colour as we watched the seasons pass. Such an honourable man struggling against nature and just about winning ....