



## Discussion Guide

### GLOBAL LENS 2006

The Global Film Initiative  
*Promoting Cross-Cultural Understanding  
Through Cinema*

# Stolen Life

Each year **The Global Film Initiative** selects films from developing countries to be presented through the *Global Lens* series, in collaboration with museums, film societies and other cultural institutions across America. The Global Film Initiative is pleased to share *Stolen Life* with audiences who may identify with the difficult choices that face a young woman when she falls in love with an unscrupulous man.

*Stolen Life (Sheng Si Jie)*, 2005, China  
Directed by Li Shaohong  
In Mandarin with subtitles in English, 90 minutes



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## ONE PAGE SUMMARY:

*Stolen Life (Sheng Si Jie)*, 2005, China

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## SYNOPSIS

Yanni is an adolescent girl growing up with her resentful aunt and grandmother in Beijing, far from the parents who gave her up when she was a baby. The girl withdraws into lonely silence in the hostile Beijing household. When she is old enough to be considered for the university, her parents arrive to discuss the family's plans for her future. They offer a blessing and a challenge: if Yanni is accepted by the university, they will continue their lifelong sacrifice to pay her fees and expenses.

Yanni's first act of independence is to hail a taxi to take her to the university. A traffic jam blocks an intersection, and Yanni, in her excitement to start her new life, sets out on foot. The man driving a delivery van who was in that traffic jam follows her – as she later reflects, she met her fate and her downfall began when she accepted a ride in his van. The delivery man, Muyu, brings her presents and takes her to the movies, and soon he declares his love – and the lonely Yanni is sure that she loves him too. She overlooks his long absences, and she believes his concocted story after she follows him to his house – about the baby crying on the bed, and the woman who chases Yanni down the street with a meat cleaver. Anyone else would have known better, Yanni later sighs, but at the time, she is only too happy to give up her place in the dormitory and move into a dank basement apartment with Muyu.

And then it is Yanni that is pregnant. She cannot continue her studies, so she spends her days in the grim little apartment, waiting for Muyu. When he loses his job, they work together at a street vending stand. The day that Yanni's aunt sees her at the stand, Yanni's past and future collide. Yet even that terrible truth is no match for the scheme devised by Muyu.

## CHARACTERS

Yanni	The main character, a young woman; her nickname is Yinni
Muyu	A delivery man
Aihua	Yanni's mother
Aiqin	Yanni's aunt

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Many scenes in *Stolen Life* were filmed in basements beneath the streets of Beijing, in small, dark, overcrowded spaces, with street noises and heavy machinery just outside. **How does this setting interact with the unfolding story? What impact does the setting have on the characters?**
2. When Yanni meets Muyu, they are wearing similar knitted caps down low on their heads, so that only their faces show. Yanni wears the cap at dinner with her parents, even after her exasperated aunt asks her to take it off. **What does the cap mean to Yanni? Why do you think Muyu wears a similar cap?**



## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR: LI SHAOHONG

### DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT

I was very disturbed when I first read the screenplay. It was truly a heart-drenching, bone-chilling sensation, especially as I realized that it is based on a true story. How do I face this woman? I am in no position to make a judgment on her upbringing and the decisions she made.

My best choice is to walk with her, into the city's underworld, into the fringe; to follow her into the depths of her soul, her small yet tenacious soul; to feel the environment where she struggles to survive, its texture, its smell, its dampness. Through her and with her, I experience the courtyard she grew up in, I got to know her auntie and granny as she would, and I come to love and hate her estranged parents as she did. And just as she is faced with the betrayal of her love and the loss of its fruit, I, too, am confronted with this choice, the consequence of which holds her very life in balance. Fortunately, her life is saved as she lets go of the dagger. I dry my eyes with her, sobering and maturing up for the world – it hasn't killed us, so we can only be stronger. It is through such perspective that I told the story, the human experience of a girl like Yanni, and it's more convincing, more immediate to the soul than any idealistic compassion can hope to be.

### BIOGRAPHY

**Li Shaohong** was born in Suzhou, Jiangsu Province, China, in 1955. As a teenager she served in the military, working in a hospital, during the Cultural Revolution. She graduated from the Beijing Film Academy and is regarded as a member of the "fifth generation" of filmmakers in China. As one of the most innovative and best-known contemporary women in this generation, Li teamed up with cinematographer Zeng Nianping and producer Li Xiaowan to found Beijing Rosat Film & TV Production Company. Her feature films include *Bloody Morning* (1990), *Family Portrait* (1992), *Blush* (1994), *The Red Suit* (2000), and *Baober in Love* (2004).



## FILM AESTHETICS

Film is unique as an art form in its synthesis of visual arts, writing, drama, movement, and sound. The following notes about film aesthetics and technique suggest some things to watch and listen for in viewing *Stolen Life*.

### Editing

The process of assembling sounds and images to create a movie. Watch for:

- Long “establishing” shots – taken from a distance to establish the setting for the story
- Close-up shots – add intensity, by flooding the screen with images at very close range
- Sequence and pacing – build meaning and rhythm in the story

*After Yanni leaves the university, she spends her time in the damp basement apartment in Beijing. Time seems to stop in the scenes of her lonely days under the mosquito net.*

*The young woman on the bed seems to live in a “still life,” colored in dingy grays, browns, and shadows. The camera barely moves. The only “action” involves Yanni adjusting the television, writing notes to Muyu on the wall, eating vegetables, and trying to catch mosquitoes in her hands.*

### Music and Sound

Music can be used to intensify the action or dialogue in a scene. At its best, music combines with images to create an experience beyond what either could create alone.

Natural sounds can add a dimension of reality – or heighten the unreality of a scene. Offscreen sounds, such as traffic noise or gunshots – can establish narrative elements that intensify the action in the scene.

*The harsh, mechanical sounds of the streets heighten the tragedy unfolding in Yanni’s life. Listen for:*

- *Constant pounding of construction machines as Yanni finds out the truth about her relationship with Muyu*
- *Shimmering electronic chords that shift from pleasant to jarring as the “love nest” with Muyu becomes a prison, and then a “love nest” for someone else*

### Narrative Structure

The narrative structure of the film establishes the major themes in the story, answering the question, “what is this story about?” Watch for:

- Contradictions and conflicts that give texture and meaning to events in the story
- Structural elements that divide the movie into “acts” – introduction, conflict, climax, resolution.

*Yanni narrates her story through voice-overs. She describes her estrangement from her parents, and her lonely childhood. As the joyful Yanni hails the taxi to her new life, the sad narrator’s voice warns that her meeting Muyu in the intersection is the beginning of her downfall. She should have seen through his lies, as any sensible person would.*

*Only in the final shattering scene is it clear who her “listener” is, and why she has had to tell her story in painful and humiliating detail.*

## NARRATIVE THEMES IN THE FILM *STOLEN LIFE*

Li Shaohong says that her only choice in bringing this young woman's story to film was to "walk with her," to present the loneliness of her childhood and the illusion of love through her eyes. Much of *Stolen Life* takes place in basement spaces beneath the city of Beijing, where shadows and noise only deepen the young woman's tragedy.

Watch for scenes or events that correspond to a particular theme, making mental or written notes as to how the theme unfolds in the film. Note whether the film developed the theme as expected, and if not, what happened instead. Questions for each theme are designed to encourage discussion.

### Families Broken Apart

1. Yanni vividly remembers meeting her mother once, on a train. She could barely look at this woman with the sweaty hands, who gave her away. In her narrator's voice, Yanni says, "I'll always remember that feeling." **How does the film portray Yanni's mother? How would you describe Yanni's feelings when she met her on the train?**
2. During the discussion at dinner about Yanni's education, her mother remembers bitterly the years after Yanni was born, when she and Yanni's father had to work so hard. "Chickens don't breed phoenixes," she says. Yanni's father finally speaks; he says, several more years of hardship are worth it for Yanni to have an education. **"Chickens don't breed phoenixes": how do you interpret this saying? What does it mean in the context of Yanni's life?**

### Independence and "Earth-shattering Changes"

3. "I thought there'd be earth-shattering changes in my life," says Yanni's narrative voice, as the girl loads her suitcase into the taxi. "I'd be like everyone, I'd have my own values, my own world." That same afternoon, she met Muyu, and she was soon drawn into his life. **Muyu brought "earth-shattering changes" into Yanni's life – why was she so willing to trade her "own values" and her "own world" for his?**
4. Yanni follows Muyu to his home, with the crying baby and the woman who chases Yanni down the street. When Muyu concocts a story to explain, Yanni's narrator voice says, "I chose to wipe out the facts." He was her first love, she says, and she "had nowhere else to go." **Yanni was still living in the dormitory at this time, and she was doing well in her classes. Why would she say she "had nowhere else to go"? Why do you think Yanni went to live with Muyu?**

### Stolen Life

5. Yanni's mother confronts her in the basement apartment and asks, "Have you thought about the future!" Yanni replies, "The future is like the present." **What does Yanni's answer mean?**
6. When Yanni confronts Muyu with the truth, he says to her, "You're so much better than me, and still you deliver yourself to my door." **Why do you think Yanni delivered herself to Muyu's door? How would you explain Muyu's view of the world?**

## PROFILE OF CHINA

**SIZE:** Fourth largest country on earth, after Russia, Canada and the US

**POPULATION:** 1.3 billion (2005 estimate)

**RELIGION:** Less than 6% of the population belong to state-sanctioned religious groups (Buddhist, Daoist, Muslim, Catholic, Protestant)

**LANGUAGES:** Chinese with numerous dialects categorized into six major groups, including Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghaiese

**LITERACY:** 90% of total population

**UNEMPLOYMENT RATE:** Estimated at 10% in urban areas, but as high as 23% when taking into account rural and underemployed workers. Source: <http://www.rand.org/commentary/070704AWSJ.html>

**CLIMATE:** Ranges from sub-arctic in the north to tropical in the south. As many as five typhoons (regional name for strong tropical cyclones; similar storms in Western hemisphere are called hurricanes) per year along southern and eastern coastlines; flooding, tidal waves, earthquakes.

**INDUSTRIES:** Heavy industries include iron and steel, petroleum refineries, machine building, weapons, automobiles and cement; textiles and clothing manufacture; consumer electronics and telecommunications; food processing

**CURRENT ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES:** Air pollution and acid rain caused by increasing use of fossil fuels; water pollution and shortages aggravated by government efforts to manage the flow of the great rivers; deforestation and soil erosion caused by centuries of poor management of resources and frequent flooding of major rivers.



Courtesy of The General Libraries, The University of Texas at Austin.

## CHINA TODAY

For thousands of years, China was a thriving empire that built great cities, produced written laws, encouraged great schools of philosophy, and built trade routes to the Middle East and Europe, with silk among its most valuable exports. After decades of war and communist rule during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, China is once again emerging as an economic powerhouse in the world, supplying manufactured goods ranging from cars to textiles to microwave ovens to computers.

As part of rapid economic growth, China has seen the unprecedented rise of a technology-based middle class, with specialized skills and real disposable income. However, the transition from a primarily agricultural economy to one based on manufacturing and construction has also dislocated millions of people.

Farmers, who were administratively assigned to their land for generations, have lost their land to developers. Where manufacturing and other state-owned enterprises have been privatized, many workers have lost the social network that came with their jobs, along with healthcare, housing and a steady income for life, all of which could be handed down from parent to child. Many of these displaced people arrive in cities like Beijing, looking for jobs. Because they are untrained and lack formal education, they often must improvise to support their families. Some find housing in the basements of large apartment buildings, and then create their own job opportunities, working for the residents upstairs. Basements of these buildings are like little cities underground, with informal workshops, where people wash and mend clothes, work as plumbers for the building, fix broken household objects, or repair shoes, next to tiny apartments where people do piecework, or cook food to sell on the streets.

The Chinese government has responded with programs to provide housing, healthcare and work, as well as conservation efforts to reduce the air and water pollution resulting from industrial growth. The government faces ongoing challenges to help the Chinese people adjust to rapid change, not least of which is meeting the growing industrial needs for fuel and other resources. The economy continues to grow at the annual rate of 9%, and by some estimates, China will overtake the United States as the largest economy on earth in about 30 years.

## BEIJING

In 2008, China's capital city of Beijing will host the Summer Olympic Games. In anticipation, the city is experiencing an explosion of growth and development, with entire neighborhoods bulldozed for high-rise buildings and roads. Beijing was built more than a thousand years ago as the capital of dynasties. Today, the city is at the heart of the fastest-growing economy on earth.

## ONLINE RESOURCES

Country Profile and Timeline: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country\\_profiles/1287798.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1287798.stm)

History of China: <http://www.economist.com/countries/China/profile.cfm?folder=History%20in%20brief>

The World Factbook: <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/ch.html>

Maps of China: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/maps/china.html>

Beijing: <http://www.ebeijing.gov.cn/default.htm>

## GLOBAL FILM INITIATIVE PARTNERS PAST AND PRESENT

BOSTON	MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
CHICAGO	CINEMA CHICAGO
CHICAGO	THE GENE SISKEL FILM CENTER
CLEVELAND	THE CLEVELAND INSTITUTE OF ART
COLUMBUS	WEXNER CENTER FOR THE ARTS
DENVER	DENVER FILM SOCIETY
HONOLULU	HONOLULU ACADEMY OF ARTS
HOUSTON	MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS
LOS ANGELES	CALIFORNIA INSTITUTE OF THE ARTS
MADISON	UW-MADISON ARTS INSTITUTE
MIAMI	MIAMI INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
MINNEAPOLIS	WALKER ART CENTER
NEW YORK	THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
OKLAHOMA CITY	OKLAHOMA CITY MUSEUM OF ART
PALM SPRINGS	PALM SPRINGS INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL
PORTLAND	NORTHWEST FILM CENTER
SALT LAKE CITY	SALT LAKE CITY FILM CENTER
SAN FRANCISCO	SAN FRANCISCO ART INSTITUTE
SAN RAFAEL	SMITH RAFAEL FILM CENTER
SARASOTA	SARASOTA FILM SOCIETY
SEATTLE	SEATTLE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL

For information on dates when *Global Lens* will be in these cities, please visit our website [www.globalfilm.org](http://www.globalfilm.org)

The Global Film Initiative is a 501(c)3 organization, founded in 2002 with the mission to promote cross-cultural understanding through the international medium of cinema.