



Cornell University Southeast Asia Program

Discussion Questions

1. What is the value, actual and symbolic, of the bicycle to Guei? To Jian? Given that bicycles have been a major mode of transportation in China, how is this particular bicycle more significant and how does the director use it to symbolize changes in Chinese society? If you have seen the Italian film, “The Bicycle Thief,” see if you can draw some parallels or contrasts with that film.

2. Some eighty years separate Lu Xun’s short story and the film, a period of dynamic change for China, politically, socially, and economically. The film focuses on the “new” capitalism in China, after decades of Maoist economic and social policies. Given this one portrait of contemporary Beijing, do you think that Guei and Jian are equals in the sense that Lu Xun envisioned at the end of his story? Chairman Mao envisioned a “classless” society; what kinds of class stratification do we see in the film? What might Lu Xun or Mao Zedong think of this “New China”?

3. How do the efforts to get ahead in life portrayed in the film (work, education) compare to what young people in the U.S. might face today? (Be specific in terms of characters and the obstacles they encounter and the choices they, or their families, make.) Do you identify with any of these young people? Why or why not?

4. Questions on the opening scenes of the film:

1. What is the effect of the music and the image of bicycles in the opening portions of the film?
2. What details show how unsophisticated Guei is about city ways?
3. Why doesn’t Guei protest at the health club when they assume he is a customer?
4. Do you think Guei’s job is a good one? Why or why not? Do you think the manager is being fair to Guei?
5. Do you think that Guei is going to find his bike (note that he has scratched an identifying mark onto it)? Why or why not?

5. Questions for the final ten minutes of the film:

1. Why does Jian tell Guei to keep the bike, that he no longer needs it?
2. What do you think of his actions? How does Guei get involved in the fight?
3. What is the effect of the chase scene? (Film majors: is the director paying homage to the “chase scenes” of Hollywood movies, and if so, do you find this scene ironic?)
4. Guei and Jian finally compromise on trading the bike back and forth, every other day. Do you think this will work?

5. What do you think Guei's options are at the end of the film?