

# City of Life and Death

## the perfect creative experience

The acclaimed black-and-white feature *City of Life and Death* chronicles the intense six-week period of the Nanking Massacre in 1937/1938. Lauded as a 'masterpiece', screenwriter/director Lu Chuan's powerful and skilfully-edited film pays a modern homage to historical detail.

In a collage-like approach, a roving camera takes the audience deep into the midst of devastated Nanking - initially without dialogue or music - capturing a multitude of faces. Alternating Japanese and Chinese viewpoints follow, as the film explores a Japanese soldier's moral dilemmas, and the heart-rending emotions and ethical quandaries of several Chinese characters in their struggle for survival. Despite a show of strength by the Japanese occupiers towards the end of the film, *City of Life and Death* finishes on a note of hope for humankind.

DP Cao Yu's main visual reference was Robert Frank's *The Americans*. "I chose colour film because of that feature. Its low-contrast fine grain effect is very quiet and gentle, yet it produces a powerful rugged effect."

Yu undertook numerous tests - both traditional and digital - before deciding to use KODAK

VISION2 50D 5201 and KODAK VISION2 200T 5217. He achieved black-and-white images through Digital Intermediate. "Why didn't I use black-and-white film or video technology? The traditional image is very high contrast and grainy; a news documentary texture. It would have made the audience think I was trying to imitate a documentary film or recreate a sense of historical texture. In my opinion, human nature, poetry and courage as depicted in *City of Life and Death* should not be subject to time restrictions. I wanted fine grain and sharp black-and-white images. The Kodak colour stocks, printed on Kodak Black-and-White Print Film 2302, gave amazing detail with very smooth, rich greyscale and fine grain," Yu remarks.

"Lu Chuan gave me great freedom and generally left camera positions, movement and framing to me. Each day he let me observe as he oversaw the actors' rehearsals and then we'd do an impromptu shoot, often using 400-feet of film in one go. The improvised approach enabled me to rely on my own sensibility to choose when and where to do close-ups and when to pull away, and was the most exciting part of our collaboration. The camera became one of the

actors: running and jumping, and crying and laughing too."

"*City of Life and Death* made me re-learn lighting" states Yu, who used lens flare extensively throughout the film. "It's very emotional and results in a kind of warmth. Whilst lighting in colour photography is realistic, in black-and-white it can be abstract. We shot the Japanese dance scene at midday, with the characters in white clothes and amongst white props. I overexposed by two or three stops. The resulting strange images could only have been achieved in black-and-white." Yu lit many daylight interiors from outside, with 24 Dinos and Maxi Brutes. In the interiors he placed candles and Chinese lanterns, and suspended Tungsten lights from the ceiling or behind furniture. A lightweight Panther Foxy crane with four 24 Dinos was used to illuminate the night market scene.

"The \$10 million-plus budget made complex

photographic equipment a temptation. But Lu Chuan insisted we shoot the film in our own free and passionate way. *City of Life and Death* has been the perfect creative experience; it stems from the heart and is full of passion and love," concludes Yu.

*City of Life and Death* was processed by Kodak Cinelabs Beijing; China Film Group Corporation undertook the DI. The film has won seven awards, including Best Cinematography at the San Sebastian International Film Festival, the Asia Pacific Screen Awards and the Taiwan Golden Horse Film Festival; and Best Feature at the Spanish International Film Festival. It is produced by Beijing Yuan Chuan Feature & TV Culture Company.

### Key Data at a glance

<b>Director</b>	Lu Chuan
<b>Cinematographer</b>	Cao Yu
<b>Film stock</b>	KODAK VISION2 50D 5201 and KODAK VISION2 200T 5217
<b>Image transfer</b>	Kodak Cinelabs Beijing
<b>Digital Intermediate</b>	China Film Group Corporation

