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Lost at Home: Jia Zhangke's Journey toward Modernity

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Economic and geopolitical convergence, demographic restructuring, and the shifting awareness of space and power have contributed to an evolving understanding of "home" in contemporary Chinese cinema. As with its "counter-notions" of travel, exile, or migration, the concept of home has been enriched, if not thoroughly re-written, by various migratory journeys as a quintessential element of contemporary Chinese life. The significance of hometown imagery transcends topical associations to encompass issues of urbanism, modernity, ethics, and historical consciousness. In this essay, I explore the political significance of home in three Jia Zhangke 賈樟柯 (1970–) films. Examining his itinerant protagonists vis-à-vis the subtext of home, I argue that the notion of home or hometown as envisioned by the filmmaker spatializes a uniquely entangled moment in Chinese modernity—a moment that, characterized by the radical asymmetry of past, present, and future, puts the linear notion of social progress and telos at stake.

A leading figure among the "Urban Generation" filmmakers, Jia Zhangke's rise in the late 1990s is propelled by a major movement in Chinese cinema that seeks to document and interpret the great urban revolution in post-socialist China. At the time Jia began his film career, China's cinematic landscape was heavily defined by the epic ethnographic cinema

of the Fifth Generation 第五代, which had enjoyed wide international recognition, and the propagandist "leitmotif films" of the state. [1] It was against these two key influences that Jia posits his own version of cinematic modernity, one that centers around place, everyday experience, and material culture, and is guided by the ethical principle to reveal and to inform. All his films share a sense of urgency to probe the true conditions of China's existence. This ethos of filmmaking is reflected in his realist approaches, ranging from location shooting, long shot-long take, the use of non-professional actors, a distinct HD aesthetic, along with a de-dramatized, third-person perspective, and the coalescence of fiction and documentary. Together, these formal and narrative traits create a particularly spatial visual aesthetic, placing dominant significance on locality, movement, and their symbolic renderings. If film as a form of spatial art not only represents space but also—following Lefebvre (1991)—produces space by shaping our spatial imagination and experiences, Jia Zhangke's films are crucial in this regard, for they bring to the fore the marginal, alternative spaces that remain largely outside the official Chinese socio-geographical imagination.

In this essay, I take a close look at three of Jia's films that have prominently engaged the topic of home in relation to place, identity, and nation: *Still Life* 三峽好人 (2006), *24 City* 24城記 (2008), and *A Touch of Sin* 天註定 (2013). Set at the turn of the twenty-first century, these films employ various modes of representation concerning the reality of space. *Still Life*, a quiet and contemplative cinematic essay on change and obsolescence, tracks two strangers' separate journeys to the Three Gorges city of Fengjie as they look for their missing spouses in the disappearing land. *24 City*

1 As Judith Pernin observes, questions on the nature of "independence" or "underground" cinema in China are often related to questions of space: "inside" or "outside" the system, "marginal," "mainstream," and "urban generation" are terms that attempt to define the specificities of this—once private—alternative cinema cultural and the relationship it entertains with public institutions. See Pernin 2010, 31. For more on the "Urban Generation", see Zhang 2007.

combines real and fictional interviews with three generations of factory workers to offer a sweeping oral history of post-reform China. *A Touch of Sin* tells four seemingly isolated stories of crime that all culminate into sudden, brutal acts of violence.

Although formally and topically diverse, these films are united by dense spatial metaphors as a key mode of expression, from nameless small towns to the urban/rural fringe to rapidly industrialized cities. The political significance of home—issues related to kinship, attachment, stability, intimacy—is often at the center of Jia's inquiry in relation to his recurring reference to China's socialist past, but also in the sense that the crises of domesticity play a crucial part in informing the quandary and unsettling character of contemporary China. Uncoincidentally, Jia Zhangke's first attempt at directing (his graduation project at the Beijing Film Academy), a fifty-nine-minute short entitled *Xiaoshan Going Home* 小山回家 (1995), already explores the profundity of this "ordinary" experience and alludes to the impossibility of return. His next three features—*Xiao Wu* 小武 (1997), *Platform* 站台 (2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* 任逍遥 (2002)—have been aptly designated as the "hometown trilogy" (Berry, 2009) in part because they are all set in Jia's home province of Shanxi, but also because the endless search for home is one of the central motifs that run through all these films.

Still Life and *24 City* continue to grapple with the shifting implications of home, using it as a prism for the complicated, nonlinear trajectory of China's post-socialist transformation. In both films, Jia is drawn to places and lives that have been marred by mandated urban development. This standpoint allows him to define the place of belonging alongside a landscape of obsolescence. *Still Life* is set in Fengjie, one of the numerous cities along the Yangtze River that were to be razed for inundation when the world's largest hydroelectric project, the Three Gorges Dam, is built. We follow coalminer Sanming, who journeys from home (the director's home province of Shanxi) to this half-standing city, hoping to find the wife

and daughter who left him 16 years ago. His wife's last known address is long expired—Fengjie changed its jurisdiction from Sichuan province to Chongqing municipality in 1997; in addition, the low-lying neighbourhood where she used to live is already submerged. Awaiting his chance for reunion, Sanming gets a job in demolition, the only booming business in the 2,000-year-old town.

A parallel story unfolds as nurse Shen Hong comes to Fengjie to look for her estranged husband, whom she has not heard from in two years. Clutching at an outdated phone number (she belatedly realizes that the local numbers have since increased from six digits to seven), she seeks help from an archaeologist friend from the old days, who works for the local antiquities bureau and is busy excavating a Han Dynasty tomb before the water level rises any higher. The two protagonists never meet onscreen, but they are paired off over the course of the film, and are connected by the act of searching amidst a landscape of devastation that mirrors their psychological makeup.

In *Still Life*, the place of home takes on the radical form of physical cancellation. The individual homes of Sanming and Shen Hong are never shown, suggesting their long depleted emotional state. Fengjie, the hometown of thousands, is reduced to rubble and will soon be submerged; and once that happens, those who are forced to leave will never be able to return fully. Human presence is just as transient as their surroundings. Jia's camera tracks his itinerant protagonists, often from a good distance, as they spend most of their time wandering on the strangely empty land. Other human traces are also captured: some remaining residents are leaving for the burgeoning urban hubs in the South, others try to stay for as long as they can; bare-chested migrant workers hammer away what is left of the city, until they, too, must leave to find their next job elsewhere.

Here, Jia's intense concern for the fate of China is echoed in the film's quiet astonishment over the scale, pace, and irreversibility of the nation's frenzied pursuit of progress. The Three Gorges Dam, the weightiest met-

aphor for China's outsized developments, is turned into a pointed social criticism. This national (and nationalist) project, built to ensure China's energy supply as it continues to perform economic miracles, required the Yangtze River basin to be flooded and more than 1.5 million people to be relocated. The film's camera captures Fengjie in its most traumatic phase of demolition. As numerous homes and businesses are hammered into pieces, the magnitude of the ruins amounts to a spectacle. The uncanny cityscape and human presence further bring to light the extensive damages inflicted by the grand project: environmental deterioration, local corruption, large-scale destruction of homes, and a nonchalant devaluation of the nation's cultural history, evidenced by the imminent inundation of ancient relics.

The omnipresent ruins and rubble that command full attention from the audience are under constant scrutiny in Jia Zhangke's signature long takes and slow pans. In sequences like that, Jia nearly approaches a form of pure cinema, where stories and characters give way to the abstract emotional experiences of human desires and failures materialized through the mise-en-scene.

The sober meditation on disappearance continues to sustain *24 City*, Jia's next feature two years later. *24 City* documents a similar experience of collective exit—the massive movement of factory workers leaving their lifelong state employment—for a collective switch from a centrally planned economy to a market economy in the 1990s. This film is set in a once-bustling state factory, known as Factory 420, in Chengdu. The factory had for decades since its establishment in 1958 been a secret military unit, manufacturing airplane engines for the nation's air force. At the height of its power, it provided for more than 30,000 employees and operated in many ways as a privileged, self-sufficient commune. But with the end of the Cold War, it lost military contracts and shifted to making home electronics. When the film begins, several rounds of layoffs have taken place, and the factory faces permanent relocation to a suburban industrial park. The land occupied by the old facility has been sold to developers, and the factory

will be torn down to make room for a luxury apartment complex "24 City."

The film takes the form of docudrama. Its narrative consists of interviews with former workers, some real and some fictional, who share stories of their pasts that are intricately involved with the factory. Along the way are some harrowing tales: a founding member of the factory recounts the day when she lost her son during her transfer to the factory; a laid-off worker describes the last meal she had with her co-workers; a man savors the old times when thrift was valued as much as self-criticism; and the woman once hailed as the most beautiful girl in the factory relives the memories of her bygone youth and missed opportunities. We are also told this is not the first massive dislocation in the history of the factory; in fact, an entire town of people was relocated from another part of the country to build the factory from scratch.

As history is remembered, it is regularly juxtaposed with its contemporary coda. Throughout the interviews, we see machines being dislodged and parts of the buildings being brought down. Jia's camera wanders through the factory's dilapidated interior and lingers for the most part on its hollow emptiness. From time to time, these tracking shots alternate with static frames of the workers and their personal belongings (a bed, a photograph, a cup) that further emphasize the heaviness of loss. As in Fengjie in *Still Life*, the visual upheavals of the factory are pivoted upon negation and erasure. The ruinous landscape attests to the story of inherent obsolescence, social woes, dislocation, and ideological vicissitudes at the fast-moving frontiers of Chinese modernity.

Home as a space is challenged: the old sense of security, lineage, and meaning embodied by the socialist notion of "home" is at once both evoked and contested. Domestic infrastructure in pre-reform China is a function of Communism's collective class identity. "Work units" (*danwei* 單位) like Factory 420 are not simply an economic entity. By providing housing, cafeteria, school, hospital and entertainment facilities, they play an encompassing role in regulating urban living. For the multiple generations of workers,

Factory 420 is in every sense a home. But as the factory's products and infrastructure became outmoded, the workers' collective identity, which had sustained them throughout the volatile history of communist China, is also rendered obsolete. Jia Zhangke engages with this historical referent and foregrounds the pain of severing ties between the socialist individuals and their collective milieu. Each interview takes a different angle to measure the crushed spirit and identity as the factory community is forced into fragments. The workers reminisce about their passions and youth, taking pride in their contributions to the nation; they speak of personal losses and sacrifices; and they hide a common sorrow behind façades of self-restraint and reticence.

The loss and pain that springs from nostalgia is highlighted here. The longing for altruism and workers' camaraderie serves as a foil for the bleak reality of massive lay-offs, a part of China's radical labor restructuring program in the 1990s that Factory 420 underwent.[2] This rapid move toward market liberalization allows the state to withdraw from its socialist responsibility to provide a safety net for employment and housing, among other welfare benefits, to its citizens. While with this labor reform, workers in principle would have more incentive and freedom to get jobs with higher returns, in practice, as one of the interviewees woefully relates, the prospect of finding a new job is dimmed by the workers' limited education, widespread ageism and gender discrimination. Being laid off, for many, amounts to permanent unemployment.

Moreover, the physical remnants of socialist architecture left in capitalism's wake have an underlying emotional valence. Factory 420 provides not only a job to do, but a place to live. To those participating in Mao's nation-building campaign (1949–78), in which heavy industry was prioritized in the national economy in order to catch up to the world's leading

2 From 1996 to 2001, state-owned industrial concerns shed 35 million jobs and government-controlled collectives dropped another 16 million people; the WTO will force 30 million more workers out of jobs. See Chin-Chuan Lee 2003, 8.

industrial powers, the factory also embodies a noble cause that gave meaning to their existence. These workers will never be part of the new economy in the same essential way they were of the old regime. The profound loss of anchoring makes a poignant comment about political ambitions, their cancellations, and collateral damage.

In a way similar to the Three Gorges Dam, Factory 420 is not only symbolic but is symptomatic of China's distressed society as the nation metamorphoses into an economic powerhouse in an increasingly global economy. *24 City* highlights ideological ambiguity by bringing to the fore an "expiring" population, veterans who supported the tumultuous communist industrialization suddenly find themselves redundant and rejected (by the same political regime) in the current phase of economic reform. Their historical destiny is grafted onto space in the form of the derelict industrial mise-en-scene. The director gives prominence to the empty shell of the evacuated factory, using copious long shots and static compositions to construct a place suspended in time and impossible to reconcile with the outside world. Multiple burdens of nostalgia, oblivion, and progress strive to redefine this place of collective belonging.

It is not hard to discern an elegiac tone in Jia's films, in which people and landscape are constantly on the verge of being outmoded. Jia's obsession with the dual vulnerability of his subjects—to history and oblivion, and to the arbitrariness of China's political culture—is memorably visualized in a series of cinematic "photo shoots." Between interviews, Jia's human subjects would pose alone or in groups against the factory's walls and facilities, looking directly into the camera. Each image lasts a few seconds in the manner of freeze-frame photos, recording an authentic moment that is irrevocably fixed in time and place, albeit one that is already lost to the future. This insistence on the image's indexicality bespeaks Jia's own artistic redemption from the relentless forward movement. In doing so, he counters the developmentalist model of memory, which tends to omit or downplay the history of the common people, especially when their pres-

ence reveals the contradictions of progress. The fragile nature of this remembrance, the fact that it is predicated on the ephemerality of corporeal existence and it can exist only in the form of digital snapshots, reminds us of the tyranny of the official history.

Jia's emphasis on memory over history underscores his ethical, more nuanced reading of historical truth. Although told individually, personal tales in the film are not meant to be thought of as national allegories, a mode of narrative employed in many Fifth Generation films. Nor do they fulfil the goal of a Classical (Hollywood) narrative, by way of constructing a unique, goal-oriented hero whose actions and worldviews guide us through the fictional world he or she centres. Instead, Jia presents his characters as social types defined by specific historical conditions. As explained in an interview on *24 City*, Jia admits to intentionally removing the "singularities" in the film's interviews:

> Of the fifty plus people I interviewed, there are some radical accounts, and there is no shortage of mind-blowing moments. But I cut those out during editing. What remains are some mundane experiences. For most Chinese people, these happenings and life experiences are common knowledge. They are not individualized or unique. But I hope this 'common narrative' can provide more room for imagination, allowing the audience to insert their own life and experience. It (this common narrative) is not an individual case, it is a collective memory.
> 我採訪的這五十多個人裡面，有非常激烈的講述，也有驚心動魄的瞬間。但是我在剪輯時，全部把它剪掉了，只留下一些常識性的經歷。對大多數中國人來說，這些經歷，這些生命經驗是常識，它不是太個體的，不是獨特的，但這個常識性講述希望提供給觀眾一種更大的想像空間，這個想像空間可以把自己的經驗、經歷都投日在裡面，它不是一個個案， 它是一个群體性的回憶。(Jia, 2009, 254)

Jia's explanation makes it clear that the "collective," as well as the greater audience—society itself—is his ultimate concern. Sebastian Veg makes a pertinent observation that, "emerging from a period when all purely private stories were irrelevant, independent post-1989 films are engaged in reinventing a public meaning for individual stories, based on a common humanity rather than on inserting the individual into the grand narratives of the modern state" (Veg 2010, 9). The ethical focus on the "collective"—be it memory, trauma, heritage, or impact—is key to Jia's concept of historical truth through the lens of personal memory.

Here, as in *Still Life*, the cinematic and spatial configurations of the modern ruins reconcile with the filmmaker's distinct historical consciousness, offering moral metaphors for the characters' difficult journeys. As the workers' testimony reveals, the flip side of China's materialistic ambitions, new forms of social hierarchy and psychological alienation are explored. The new 24 City development, displayed in an architectural model that implies a prominent future, is symbolized as a monument to wealth, prestige, and private ownership, notions fundamentally at odds with the values of collectivism embodied by the old factory. The images that emerge from the raw zone of demolition and displacement provide revealing glimpses into China's present moment. Modes of space, as well as temporality in Jia Zhangke's films, are multiple and coexisting, reflecting the split and shifting grounds of contemporary identity, a topic that will continue to inform Jia's later films.

Both *Still Life* and *24 City* reveal the evolution of spatial planning as a new hierarchical model that divides people by region, descent, age, and socio-economic status. They visualize the complicated relationship between space and social issues by showing how people's fate is determined by the place they are from, occupied, lost, or just passed through. Jia's preoccupation with social realities and their spatial associations is equally, if not more, evident in his next film. *A Touch of Sin* (henceforth "Sin") moves away from the reserved, observational style that characterizes much of Jia's

earlier work, and leans instead upon sensational plot elements of the crime and martial arts genres. But it continues to employ compelling spatial metaphors to critique China's problematic modernity. In what follows, I will circle back to the home (and hometown) narratives in *Sin*, and use it as a vehicle for a broader set of issues, such as how landscape is ethically implicated and represents the architecture of class, gender, and power imposed by dominant institutions.

Sin begins with striking images of multiple fatalities: a deadly traffic accident, a roadside robbery turned bad, and a triple murder within the first four minutes. So begins a film about "fated" deaths—*Sin*'s original Chinese title can be roughly translated into "destined by fate"—that will then delve into four individual acts of violence, based on recent real-life crime cases. In the first story, an ex-miner named Dahai singlehandedly wipes out a greedy boss and his cronies for refusing to share profits with the villagers as promised. In the second story, roving robber Zhou San returns home for his mother's 70th birthday, watches the Chinese New Year fireworks with his son, and skips town again after shooting and robbing a woman on a busy street. The third story is about Zheng Xiaoyu, a receptionist at a sauna brothel, who turns self-defense into revenge after a boorish client tries to force himself on her. In the last story, young migrant worker Xiaohui bounces through a series of low-paying jobs and finally takes his own life after suffering a string of setbacks.

Each story has a location as its chapter title—"Wujinshanwu," "Shapingba," "Nightcomer Sauna,", and "Oasis of Prosperity"—to define the venues of crime. Compared to *Still Life* and *24 City*, *Sin*'s geographic scope broadens considerably to include the entire country, from a coalmining village in Shanxi in northern China to the rural towns near Chongqing in the southwest, from Hubei of central China to the industrial port city of Dongguan in the south. The film's geographic vision suggests an overall significance of national landscape as chaos. While the stories do not overtly intersect, the four protagonists are serendipitously related: Dahai chances

upon Zhou San at the scene of a traffic accident; Zhou San boards the same long-distance bus as Xiaoyu's lover, whose factory in Guangzhou briefly employs Xiaohui; in the film's coda, Xiaoyu appears in Dahai's hometown for a job interview at the local boss's company, now run by his widow, as if bringing the arc of the narrative to a full circle. This uncanny interconnectedness reveals a common fate that binds everyone together, a common vulnerability in the face of swiftly changing social forces, and the same existential problems threatening to undo the very fabric of a civilized society.

The concept of hometown, understood in its cognate notions such as stability, cohesion, and communal support, serves as an important pressure point here. In the first two stories, hometown has a strong presence. However, this presence is also most troubling. Dahai's home village Wujinshan (Black Gold Mountain) is one of the many sleepy, rural mining communities in Shanxi province. The village's economy is monopolized by Boss Jiao Shengli, a nouveau riche who made his first fortune by privatizing the local coal mine and thus enjoys considerable business clout over local officials. Among his fellow villagers, Dahai is the only one who dares to challenge Boss Jiao and his allies, trying to reveal the illicit collusion between local officials and big business that had brought financial destitution to the area. He confronts the village chief and the accountant, and even tries to send a petition letter to the central government in Beijing, but these attempts are consistently met with neglect, denial, and humiliation.

In a highly orchestrated airport arrival ceremony, villagers are assembled to deliver flowers, applause and drumming as Boss Jiao emerges from his newly purchased private jet, much like a high-profile political leader. Dahai takes the opportunity to call him out publicly, demanding an explanation for the poverty and inequality that plagues the village. As Yanjie Wang remarks, this scene dramatizes the "state-capitalist alliance" (Wang 2015, 162) that renders political and economic power reciprocal and even interchangeable. Dahai's brave act of defiance, however, leads us to one of the film's most violent moments, where Boss Jiao's hired thugs beat him

repeatedly on the head with a shovel until he falls unconscious. The thugs would later visit him in the hospital with a stack of bills for his "trouble," and that is when Dahai picks up his rifle and takes justice into his own hands. Individual violence is presented as the only audible answer to the overwhelming, systemic violence, which drowns out any dissident voice inharmonious with the ideology of growth.

Commentators are quick to point out the film's homage to *wuxia* 武侠, a classical Chinese genre that typically features a knight-errant hero on a quest for revenge and social justice. The influence of the genre is most felt in the first (Dahai) and the third (Xiaoyu) stories, where the grim situations that trap the protagonists also evince a corrupted and lawless society, a typical setting of classic *wuxia* novels and movies. For example, Dahai's character is clearly the fulfillment of Wu Song 武松 and Lin Chong 林冲, two famous outlaws from the Ming dynasty vernacular fiction *Water Margin* 水浒传 (Cai 2015, 75; Wang 2015, 166).[3] But the story's allegorical overtone does not stop here. Dahai's character as a half-crazed lone hero, against whom a large share of social animosity is directed, also begs comparison with Lu Xun 鲁迅's madman (Lu 1918) and other "light sleepers" (Lu 1922) in his stories, who are cursed with knowledge of the world and invariably preyed on by their benighted, apathetic countrymen. This association admits Dahai's greater and more intense reality, calling attention to a different side of the systemic violence that has incited his killing spree. At this chapter's darkest moments, Dahai is viciously isolated, taunted, and

3 The novel is set in the Song dynasty. Lin Chong is a military official, who is framed and exiled because the adopted son of a powerful official coverts Lin's wife. Lin Chong eventually finds out about the scheme, kills the evildoers and becomes an outlaw on the Liang Mountain. Wu Song is known for his physical strength and bravery after he punches a ferocious tiger to death in a forest for self-preservation. In the film, before starting his killing spree, Dahai walks pass a theatre stage, where a Jin opera troupe is performing an episode from The Water Margin featuring Lin Chong. Dahai carries a rifle wrapped in a tiger motif towel, alluding to the well-known scene where Wu Song bravely kills a tiger in the same novel.

ridiculed by his fellow villagers. In the eyes of his community, he is a stubborn malcontent, a non-team player, a fanatic who has lost touch with the reality, and probably worst of all, a fool who dares to test the authorities and upset the status quo.

As in many of Lu Xun's stories, the cowardice, apathy and malice of the "slumbering crowd" constitute the encompassing sphere in Jia's visual representation of the modern rural town. Jia seems determined to give Lu Xun's "outcry" 吶喊 a modern update, renewing the message that China's systemic social violence consists of not only those who cause suffering, but also the unmoved bystanders of injustice. The villagers' lack of consciousness, aggravated by their callous, exploitative behavior—for example, after Dahai's accident, young men in the village quickly tease him with his new nickname "Golf" 高爾夫 because the way the thug wielded the shovel was similar to hitting a golf ball—forms the film's most oppressive structuring of space. This tension is vividly felt through Jia's controlled camera lens, which generally avoids two-shots or shot-reverse-shot and focuses only on Dahai. The effect is one of partial happenings and limited perspective, and the audience is deprived of the instant gratification of knowing the counterpart's reaction, but is offered a vicarious experience of the character's paranoia, pain, and indignation. Seen through this restricted and psychic frame, the local community is stripped of its communal significance and becomes a virtual zone of moral infirmity. Compared to *Still Life* and *24 City*, where hometown's disintegration is seen through physical disappearance and the loss of collective values, *Sin* paints an even grimmer picture, where a physically intact, but spiritually corrosive hometown eradicates the possibility of ever coming home. No longer a place of untroubled belonging, hometown on display can be insular, exclusionary, and a site of symbolic exile.

The idea of impossible return is intimated throughout the film. In Zhou San's story (chapter-titled "Shapingba"), his dormant hometown signals a different reality of oppressive social structure. Located near Chongqing city in southwest China, the home village is a rural backwater

that is years, if not decades, behind the economic development of much of contemporary China. Since the place harbors no real prospect for its residents, most adult villagers, especially men, opt to find work in big cities and leave their children, wives, and elderly behind. That the economic disadvantage, rooted in China's uneven regional development policy, cannot be overcome with a limited form of labor mobility is a point that will be made clear in the film's final chapter. Here Jia accentuates the breakdown of domestic life and the weakened centrality of home. In Zhou San's family, both his elder brothers work in the city year round, as do most of their relatives, such that they have to postpone the celebration of their mother's seventieth birthday—an important benchmark for elderly people in China—to the holiday season of the Chinese New Year, the only time when most people are around.

The widespread erosion of family stability inflicts psychological tensions upon both the individuals who leave and those who stay. On the eve of the Chinese New Year, young villagers gather to play mahjong and card games. A fight quickly breaks out when a "left-behind" husband hears the obscene insinuation that his wife has taken up the world's oldest profession in the city. Leading up to the bloody altercation, there is casual mentioning of village girls infected with HIV while offering "special service" in the coastal urban hubs, as if it was the repeat of yesterday's news. This seemingly irrelevant incident, which Zhou San observes with disinterest, reveals a deep-seated masculine hierarchy, a differentiation between the superior urban masculinity and the fragile, disempowered rural manhood that pervades China.

In the film's prologue, Zhou San establishes himself as a cool-headed killer who guns down three muggers that tried to corner him on a deserted mountain road. When his story becomes the center of the film, the incongruity between his identities as a highly efficient criminal and an inadequate father and husband (and son, for he is unable to fulfill filial duty while being away and unreachable) comes to the fore. Aware of how he has

failed his family, Zhou San makes the unusual request that his wife takes a lover or file for divorce. When she asks why he cannot stay in the village, he simply replies, "it's boring." The only way for him to escape the boredom is shooting guns; and his obsession may drive him still further afar, perhaps across the distant border of Burma (Myanmar) where he can find a faster-loading gun.

Zhou San's story offers a rare glimpse into the discontent and twisted psychological needs of a flawed, unstable male subjectivity at the margins. Equipped with little social and economic resources, his desire to break free takes on a violent intensity. As the film suggests, he is not an unfeeling killer and his criminal acts cannot be fully explained by monetary gains (he turns down an offer of money from his brother). Rather, his brutal acts of social destruction can be at least in part construed as a radical means to feel alive, claim control, and to elude the fate of working-class conformity, which, to Zhou San, is analogous to being slaughtered like an innocent animal.[4] From a different perspective, the gist of the wrong in his criminal offense is not the brutal act of taking lives but rather an outright denial of the value of individual lives. Back at home, in keeping with the tradition of New Year's sacrifice, Zhou San offers cigarettes in lieu of incense to four directions, seeking peace with the ghosts that had died in his hands: "The old Heaven-god ("*laotianye*"老天爺) was to blame. If you have any grievances, tell heaven about them." Evoking the film's title, his plea expresses a strong sense of fatalism, admitting to a high degree of external control that minimizes the role of individual initiative, capacities, and responsibilities in the determination of life consequences.

It is in this light that we see the extreme story of Zhou San as one of an authoritarian personality contesting its marginality. Absorbed by ennui, and emboldened by the power of cruelty, Zhou pursues individual freedom not only from financial servitude but also from the constraint of norma-

4 Many reviewers have noted how various animals are used in the film as metaphors for "sub-human." For a detailed analysis of the animal symbolism, see Wang 2015.

tive morality, whose principles, much like the homes in the village, have already been hollowed out in a materialistic, money-centric society. Thus, his quest toward male autonomy, toward becoming a "free" human agent, poses urgent ethical questions beyond an individual's aberrant mentality or behavior, and is inherently related to the national rhetoric of developmentalism, which has exacerbated many social problems ranging from rural poverty, socioeconomic inequality, corruption, crime, domestic stress, to widespread moral and spiritual malaise.

In *Sin*, all traditional social values and identities, especially those central to the cohesion of the society, are crumbling or have broken down entirely. Jia Zhangke has illustrated how easily the bedrock of seemingly secure social establishments such as family and community can be fractured and dismantled.[5] In the film's two other stories, the physical form of home or hometown is absent. The two protagonists, Xiaoyu and Xiaohui, are both migrant workers at the lower rungs of the society, who are left to their own devices to navigate the dangerous waters of China's illegal economy and consumerist landscape. In "Nightcomer Sauna," Xiaoyu from a family of separated parents is giving an ultimatum to her long-time lover, her old boss of a garment factory in Guangzhou, to leave his wife. Deprived of a domestic frame of reference, Xiaoyu (and other female characters in this episode, including her mother and coworkers) moves only between anonymous public space (train station, streets, the back of a truck) and the gaudy, enclosed interior of the sauna and massage parlor where she greets customers.[6]

The Nightcomer Sauna—and its much larger and more lavish coun-

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5 The deterioration of family life and relationship in contemporary China is a theme repeatedly occurs in Jia Zhangke films. In *Platform*, Cui Mingliang's father abandons his family for another woman; Binbin and Xiao Ji, main protagonists in *Unknown Pleasure* (2002), are both from single-parent families.

6 Xiaoyu's separated mother is also an itinerant worker laboring as a cook for an out-of-town construction team.

terpart, the nightclub in the film's last chapter—represents a commercialized, gendered space, subjugating female bodies to masculine control and consumption. In a scene setting up this soon-to-be crime scene, Jia's camera surveys the sauna's break room. The large area is lined with rows of reclining chairs; scantily dressed young women are taking a nap or killing time on their phones or doing their nails until the next call of service comes; exhausted waiters and receptionists (Xiaoyu included) are trying to catch a moment's sleep before the next shift. Every face, awake or asleep, is marked by exhaustion or tedium. The slow sorrowful soundtrack lingers to accentuate the soul-sapping, mind-numbing experiences of China's underground sex industry.

The illegal economy is a recurrent theme in Jia Zhangke's films. Various aspects of this murky underworld—prostitution, robbery, extortion, bribery, gangster activities, theft of public assets, connivance of business and politics—have found their representations in Jia's cinematic universe. Oftentimes, these illegal operations loom in the background without threatening to interfere with the stories.[7] But in *Sin*, corruption, coercion, and ubiquitous violence are the order of the day. Soon after the ultimatum, the furious wife of Xiaoyu's lover pays her a surprise visit at work with two thugs, gives her a beating, and sets an ominous precedent for what is yet to come. The next day, Xiaoyu witnesses a cruel beating of a truck driver for refusing to pay an unofficial "toll." The deadly conflict follows that evening. Two gruff and obstinate clients (who happen to be the hooligans running the toll station) insist on her service even after she repeatedly states she is not a prostitute. Enraged by her rejection, one of them shoves her down onto a couch and slaps her in the face with a wad of cash, over and over again. "I have money," he yells, "isn't it good enough? I will smother you in

7 A particularly charged example is little Brother Ma's sudden death in *Still Life*, which is vaguely tied to the widespread political corruption and violence in the demolition zone yet there is no overarching narrative to make sense of this absurd murder.

it!" The beating goes on for what feels like an eternity. Shot in an extended long take to emphasize its emotional intensity, this scene is undeniably the most painful part to watch.[8] As with Dahai, Xiaoyu finds the only answer to violence is more violence. So she abruptly pulls out her fruit knife, thrusts it into the man's chest, stabs and slashes two more times in order to thoroughly eliminate the threat. Her act of vengeance, much like that of Dahai, is highly allegorical and aestheticized, evoking typical martial arts movements and especially the female knight-errant in King Hu 胡金銓's (1932–97) martial arts classic *A Touch of Zen* 俠女 (1971), to which the film's English title alludes.

Commentators have observed the intersections of capitalism, ideology, and patriarchy in Jia Zhangke's films and in this scene in particular.[9] What is usually overlooked is Xiaoyu's emotional and psychological distress, which, in the sequence of events leading up to the bloody clash, is boiling slowly into a storm: a brief (and likely last) meeting with her lover, their curtailed farewell at the train station, the wife's insult and the thugs' assault, the news of a train collision (hence possible death of her lover), the savage beating at the toll booth, a documentary about animals committing suicide. Jia goes to great lengths to show us how, while seemingly random on the surface, these occurrences all, in their own ways, contribute to the throes of Xiaoyu's emotional turmoil. Her shock, humiliation, vulnerability, and aching slowly engulf her life force, and would heighten her sense of degradation and finally lead to the eruption of violence. It is in this

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8 Xiaoyu is beaten thirty-eight times onscreen and the scene took six hours to film. Zhao Tao talks about the physical pain to endure in shooting the scene in an interview: https://www.flixist.com/interview-jia-zhangke-zhao-tao-a-touch-of-sin--216577.phtml.

9 For example, Michael Berry equates "to get rich is glorious" to China's "new state ideology" in his analysis of Jia's *Unknown Pleasure* (2002). See Berry 2009, 99. Yanjie Wang further argues that in this episode patriarchy is working in tandem with money-centered ideology to reduce women to commodities for economically empowered men to consume in this episode. See Wang 2015, 165–69.

perspective that Xiaoyu's rootless, defenseless contemporary identity is at its most palpable. Removed from the stabilizing force of home, a site of meaning-making and possible resistance to the homogenizing powers of rampant materialism, she has little emotional reserves or moral license to fall back on in a rigidly patriarchal, capitalist world. Her female subjectivity can be easily reduced to an object of consumption, before turning into a target for, as well as a perpetrator of, violence.

Along with Xiaoyu's downfall comes the somber reminder of the supremacy of market logic and the capitalist tendency to commodify all things, including lives and ethics. This message continues to be the subtext underlying the film's concluding chapter, "Oasis of Prosperity." Its protagonist, Xiaohui, who could have come from Dahai or Zhou San's hometown, is one of the numerous rural workers seeking a more prosperous future in the high-growth metropolitan area in southern China. His story draws from the real-life event of a spate of employee suicides at Foxconn 富士康 factories in Shenzhen in 2010 and 2011.[10] International news reports interpret the tragedy as a paradigm of the global sweatshop problem and ascribe the deaths to heavy workload, poor work conditions, excessive overtime, military-style management, low wage, and so on. But *Sin* probes into the social and psychological circumstances that have robbed people of a sense of meaning and control, as we watch the protagonist as he makes a fast descent from hope to disillusionment.

In line with the film's other protagonists, Xiaohui's fate is in essence that of a lone individual, stripped of all focal points of stability, who gets caught in a hostile place within the country's highly uneven and exploitative terrain of capitalist modernity. In this episode, Jia Zhangke revisits

10 In 2010–11, there were eighteen attempted suicides resulting in fourteen deaths. In 2012, 150 workers gathered on a rooftop and threatened to jump. Similar events happened again at a smaller scale in 2016. Foxconn is the single largest employer in mainland China with 1.3 million people on its payroll. See Brian Merchant 2017.

the theme of "mobility" and tells a quintessential migrant worker story.[11] Earlier in the film, Zhou San's despondent rural hometown suggests that (domestic) economic migration is not a choice but a necessity for survival. Here, the filmmaker continues to examine the fixed nature of migrant labor in spite of this mobility.[12] Xiaohui's story centers on the gulf between the tantalizing prospect of upward mobility and the socio-economic constraints imposed on low-wage, low-status migrant laborers. The better part of the story takes place in a glitzy nightclub/high-end brothel where Xiaohui gets a job as a waiter. Working here at first appears to be an exciting upgrade from his previous factory job (which he flees to avoid financial penalty after accidentally causing a work-related injury of a co-worker): dressed in tux and tails, equipped with a walkie-talkie, taught to greet guests in three languages (Mandarin, Cantonese, English), mingling with beautiful girls, and, occasionally, earning a good tip from a generous customer. Ever so briefly, it seems as if Xiaohui has found the opportunity, both to be at the center of the affluent Chinese society and to earn the cash necessary to purchase commodities symbolic of a modern urban identity.

Yet reality soon falls short of promise. First it is a piece of online news—read aloud from an iPad by Xiaohui's love interest Lianrong, a performer and prostitute in the club—that a corrupt regional official is exposed to have amassed over 130 Louis Vuitton handbags. "[The bags are] are worth at least 2 million yuan!" Lianrong exclaims. The extravagance begs comparison with Boss Jia's private jet in Dahai's story, and makes a strong contrast to a later scene, where Xiaohui is seen overjoyed to receive

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11 Jia's most significant films on this topic include his graduation short *Xiaoshan going home* (1995) and *The World* (2005).

12 This theme is treated symbolically in *The World* (2005). Set in a theme park in Beijing, its migrant- worker characters can travel the "world" in its miniature form within hours, but in reality, they hardly step outside the park and no one has ever boarded a plane.

a generous tip of $100 Hong Kong dollars.[13] If the excessive wealth of the few, in the form of a news headline, seems like a distant reality that would never touch their lives, the full weight of a hopeless future eventually dawns on him when the more seasoned, pragmatic Lianrong rejects his advances, gingerly revealing that she needs money to raise her young child. The motif of an emasculated rural masculinity resurfaces and becomes more prominent vis-à-vis the false promise of economic advancement and freedom reigning over present-day China. Despite the mobility that allows Xiaohui to travel from inland to the coast and to change one job after another, he is permanently trapped in the vicious cycle of low-wage jobs that lead nowhere. In embracing the rhetoric of progress and consumerism, Xiaohui and his fellow migrant workers merely submit themselves to the profit-driven mechanism of the market economy, and reinforce their roles as subjugated and objectified individuals empowered only to sell their labor.

In the chapter's last segment, Xiaohui briefly returns to a manufacturing job (his badge shows "FSK", likely the abbreviation of "Fu-Shi-Kang", the pinyin romanization of Foxconn in Mandarin), wearing a worker's uniform, toiling at the assembly line, and sharing a cramped dorm room with seven other workers. The segment begins with a striking wide-angle shot of the vast dormitory building as Xiaohui looks off his balcony: row upon row of cramped dorm rooms, rigid and monotonous in design, identical to the one he stays in; the sense of entrapment is visualized by the horizontal bars of the building filling up almost the entire screen, and further punctuated by the intertitle: "Oasis of Prosperity." Here, the limited reach of the city's apparent prosperity, as well as the exploitative nature of the capitalist mode of production, sanctioned by the nation's leaders to ensure continuous and exponential growth, is at its most pointed. This "materialist understanding of workers' life" (Wang 2008, 499) also reveals far-reaching-

13 In an earlier scene, we learn that an average factory job provides a basic monthly salary of ¥1,200 RMB, plus room and board, although in reality workers usually gets ¥2,500 with overtime.

ing spatial interdependence. The factory campus is a clear example of what Saskia Sassen calls a "microenvironment with global span," (2003, 20) a place that is experienced indigenously, captured in local topography, but also an essential part of networks that operate globally.

Jia's sympathetic eye sees Xiaohui's self-destruction as an effect brought about by multiple disillusionments and letdowns: loss of belief in social mobility, economic and romantic defeats, the dreariness of the daily grind, unconscious distraction by the materialistic environment, and the fundamental conundrum of his rootlessness. But most directly, his death is prompted by an unsparing system of indebtedness that, embedded within the logic of capitalist exchange, has come to dominate his family and social network: his mother's incessant demand for money over long-distance calls, and the dire financial consequence Xiaohui must now face as his injured co-worker and his gang finally catch up with him.

Articulating the social reality of China from the spatial, geopolitical position of the oppressed, Jia Zhangke's films craft the limited and uncertain social exposure and prospects of all his protagonists. But in his more recent films discussed here, these characters have come to be defined almost exclusively by their geographical roots and socio-economic backgrounds. Shoved into circumstances of utter deprivation, forced into places of pure misery, and possessing fates of total despair, they share the same alienation from their (rural) roots and a great sense of vulnerability to the outside world. The collapse of family and community ties has made it increasingly impossible for them to rise above the categories to which they have been assigned, which, for the most part, are the narrow roles of laborers or commodities within the relentless cycle of production and consumption.

Inherently tragic, these characters are representations of China's dissolving identity, broken or taken apart by an unevenly dynamic post-socialist society, becoming fragments of a seemingly unified vista. Their tenuous connection to home, and involuntary position at the frontier of China's urban expansion, exposes the existential suffering and political anguish of

the entire population. Jia Zhangke's particular evocation of space—in emphasizing its unevenness, fractures, and non-linearity—enunciates an important form of resistance to hegemony and systems of power: it not only undermines the ideological certainty of progress, but also opens up a representative space for those on the margins and, ultimately, an authentic, fuller expression of Chinese modernity that cannot be resolved into abstraction.

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