

Introduction

From Fenyang to the World

WHEN WE LOOK BACK ON the cinema of the People's Republic of China (PRC) from 1949 to the present, one can divide this period of film history into three phases: the socialist period, the Chinese New Wave, and the era of commercial cinema. From the early 1950s through the late 1970s, virtually all of PRC film history was dominated by government-sponsored propaganda films. This was socialist realist cinema that projected what an ideal world *should* look like—a world filled with utopian socialist visions, Maoist thought, images of patriotism and martyrdom, and clearly delineated lines between “heroes” and “villains.” During this period, the war film—often depicting the Korean War, the War of Resistance against Japan, and the Chinese Civil War—and later the eight model opera films from the Cultural Revolution would dominate the Chinese screen.

With the reform policies initiated by Deng Xiaoping in 1978, a new cultural space opened up in China, and the 1980s saw the beginning of what would be called the “Culture Fever.” Suddenly a vibrant combination of influences began to flood into China from the outside: rock and roll, the English pop duo Wham!, Western classical music, Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, magic

realism, Milan Kundera, Umberto Eco. These examples of European culture combined with a rediscovery of traditional Chinese religion, thought, and cultural practices—Buddhism, Daoism, Confucianism, tai chi, qigong—to create a cultural renaissance in China. One by one, all the various arts saw radical movements that revolutionized the Chinese cultural landscape—the Stars (Xingxing huahui) collective in art; the Misty Poetry (Menglong shi) movement and the *Today* (Jintian) group that opened up a new space for cultural and poetic discourse; the Scar (Shanghen) movement that presented traumatic remembrances of the Cultural Revolution through poetry, oil painting, literature, and film; and the early origins of contemporary Chinese rock and pop music from artists like Cui Jian.

Eventually, this “Culture Fever” would give rise to China’s first New Wave cinematic movement—the Fifth Generation. Dominated by a core group of filmmakers who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982, the Fifth Generation was fueled equally by the experience of growing up during the radicalism of the Cultural Revolution and reaching early adulthood during the vibrant early days of the Reform Era. They would go on to make films that challenged the very definition of Chinese cinema. Films like Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*, 1984) represented a new page in Chinese cinema history. While the film presented peasants and soldiers—familiar subjects in socialist Chinese cinema—the method of representation was completely different from anything that had appeared previously on the Chinese screen. Instead of black-and-white heroes and villains, *Yellow Earth* featured morally ambiguous characters, a probing and brooding existential tone, an open-ended conclusion, and a bold new visual language that employed unorthodox horizon lines and extensive use of montage, metaphor, and symbolism. Starting around 1983, the Chinese New Wave would mark the beginning of the second major phase in PRC cinema history as *One and Eight* (*Yige he bage*, 1983), *Yellow Earth*, and other early films of the Fifth Generation began to establish a new aesthetic and narrative language for Chinese film. And while many Fifth Generation filmmakers would eventually turn toward more commercial cinematic pursuits, the experimental edge of their early work would be picked up and continued by the Sixth Generation in the early 1990s.

As the Sixth Generation evolved and the movement they represented began to develop a collective voice, fundamental differences between this group and its predecessors emerged. Early representative filmmakers of the Sixth Generation like Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan eschewed epic narratives in favor of depictions of the everyday, heroes were replaced by

characters from the margins of society, aestheticized mise-en-scène was abandoned in favor of a gritty documentary-esque style, and adaptations of contemporary literary classics were tossed aside in order to adapt original, autobiographical, and real-life stories set mostly in contemporary urban China. These differences aside, on some level, both the Fifth and the Sixth Generation can be seen as distinct phases of a second stage in Chinese film history that was very much dominated by aesthetics and principles of New Wave art cinema.

Born in 1970, Jia Zhangke was several years younger than filmmakers like Wang Xiaoshuai and Zhang Yuan, but he would eventually come to be regarded as the leading voice of the Sixth Generation. Jia grew up in Fenyang, a town in Shanxi Province. He would spend his first years during the latter phases of the Cultural Revolution, through which he was exposed to the socialist realist cinema of that era. But by the time Jia was six years old, the cultural thaw had begun, and a much broader tapestry of cultural influences would slowly become available throughout Jia's adolescence. He fell in love with the voice of Taiwanese songstress Teresa Teng (Deng Lijun) through shortwave radio broadcasts and imitated moves from the US break-dancing movie *Breakin'* (1984). He would study painting in the county seat of Taiyuan and eventually had his own artistic epiphany after attending a screening of Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*. Jia would later recall the dramatic impact this film had on him: "That film changed my life. It was at that moment, after watching *Yellow Earth*, that I decided I wanted to become a director and my passion for film was born. . . . Before [that], virtually all of the other Chinese films I had seen were basically state-sponsored works laden with propaganda, all made in a very conservative mold. So my cinematic imagination was always very limited; I never realized there were other possibilities for film. But all of that changed after watching *Yellow Earth*. Suddenly I was struck with a new paradigm for cinematic expression" (chapter 1). That fateful experience led Jia down a path to become a filmmaker. He went on to study film at the Beijing Film Academy, where he was active in several student film groups and began to make a series of short films. It was through that series of early short films—*One Day in Beijing*, *Du Du*, and *Xiao Shan Going Home*—that Jia started to develop his signature cinematic style.

Xiao Shan Going Home traces a few days in the life of a migrant worker in Beijing. As the Chinese New Year draws near, Xiao Shan (Wang Hongwei), an out-of-work restaurant cook, decides to return home to visit his family for the holiday. The entire fifty-eight-minute film traces Xiao Shan's journey—not as he returns home but as he traverses Beijing calling on a

variety of characters, including a university student, a ticket scalper, and a prostitute, in hopes of finding someone willing to accompany him back to his hometown. The “Going Home” in the film’s English title hints at an action eternally suspended; Xiao Shan never actually makes it to his destination, and “home” proves to be an ever-elusive site just out of grasp. This detail would prove to be a powerful metaphor for what was to come in Jia Zhangke’s cinematic oeuvre, a world in which characters face an environment pregnant with possibilities that never come to fruition. *Xiao Shan Going Home* was actually a student film shot during Jia’s days at the Beijing Film Academy; it would help establish his stylistic direction and attention to the everyday. *Xiao Shan Going Home* was also the first film to star Wang Hongwei, who would become one of Jia’s most frequent collaborators. When Jia brought *Xiao Shan Going Home* to Hong Kong in 1997 for the Hong Kong Independent Short Film and Video Awards, it also set in motion the formation of his early core creative team—cinematographer Nelson Yu Lik-Wai (Yu Liwei) and producers Chow Keung (Zhou Qiang) and Lee Kit-Ming (Li Jieming). With the help of this team and its production company Hu Tong Productions, Jia would make a series of films that would rewrite the rules for Chinese independent cinema. Together they would go on to create some of Jia’s most important films—*Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *Still Life*, and *24 City*. Over the course of making these films—and all of his subsequent work—Jia would continually navigate the space between China’s socialist past and its new identity as a global superpower. While the vast majority of China’s filmmakers have wholeheartedly embraced the latter identity—making big-budget, blockbuster-style films that seem to complement China’s political and economic rise—Jia has remained fairly consistent in making smaller-scale, art house-style films that ask difficult questions about one’s place in society, alienation, technology, exploitation, the environment, and the disorientation one faces when living through moments of radical social change.

Jia’s first major cinematic statement was a series of films that would come to be referred to as the “Hometown Trilogy” (*Guxiang sanbuqu*). *Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, and *Unknown Pleasures* constituted a remarkable group of films that broke new ground in terms of their sophisticated use of film language, documentary film-style aesthetics, realist tone, employment of nonprofessional actors, and complex, layered story lines. Each of the three films was shot in a different format (16mm, 35mm, and digital) and spanned a different time period (1996, the 1980s, and 2002, respectively), yet collectively they created one of the most consistent and powerful cinematic statements

to come out of the contemporary Chinese film scene. All three eschewed portrayals of both the “backward” countryside and the “modern” big city usually seen in Chinese cinema in favor of “small-town,” everyday China. The trilogy also focused not on traditional “heroes” but on everyday marginalized protagonists (dancers, pickpockets, and delinquents) in an attempt to reveal the texture of Chinese reality.

Highlighting a few days in the life of a small-time pickpocket in Fenyang, *Xiao Wu* revealed the breakdown of interpersonal relationships in Xiao Wu’s world. The film utilized a documentary-like approach, yet woven into the handheld camerawork and gritty style was a carefully designed structure that traced the tragic destruction of Xiao Wu’s relationships with his former best friend, a would-be girlfriend, and his soon-to-be-estranged parents. Playing out against Xiao Wu’s story is the larger story of mass-scale demolition and forced relocation being carried out in his (and the director’s) hometown of Fenyang. More ambitious, *Platform* unfolds in more epic time, spanning the entire decade of the 1980s, from the early days of the Reform Era in the late 1970s up until the time of the Tiananmen crackdown in 1989. Playing out against this canvas of massive social change is a more quotidian story of a group of young dreamers who are members of a song-and-dance troupe who attempt to navigate the changing world around them. *Unknown Pleasures* continued Jia’s exploration and updated his take on China’s transformation to 2002, portraying two lost teenagers whose coming-of-age story is plagued by a series of misfortunes and missteps. Shot entirely in digital, the film was also an important early example of digital filmmaking in China. *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures* were also notable for introducing Zhao Tao. Trained in classical Chinese dance and a graduate of the Beijing Dance Academy, Zhao Tao would succeed Wang Hongwei as Jia’s most important on-screen collaborator, starring in almost all of his subsequent dramatic features and eventually becoming his wife.

While Jia’s Hometown Trilogy established the filmmaker internationally, in China his films were limited to small screenings in film clubs, universities, and independent film festivals and were available as underground DVDs. It was not until the release of *The World* (2004) that Jia Zhangke’s films were commercially screened in China. *The World* also marked a turning point in Jia’s film aesthetic. Its protagonists find themselves in Beijing working at World Park, a theme park modeled after Disney’s Epcot Center where all the great tourist sites of the world are collected in miniature. There, migrant workers from Fenyang and beyond can have lunch atop the Eiffel Tower, stroll over London Bridge, and gaze at the World Trade Center towers, which,

as one character observes, here are still standing. The cast features Zhao Tao as Tao, a dancer/performer who struggles with her relationship with her boyfriend Taisheng (Cheng Taishen), a security guard at the park. At the heart of the film is the deep disconnect between the glossy and glamorous global tourist destination sites, which are “fake,” and the isolated, exploited lives of the workers and performers who inhabit the park, which are all too “real.” Through this radical juxtaposition of opulent spaces and disenfranchised workers, *The World* unveils its scathing critique of globalism, its meditation on the place of the simulacrum in postmodern society, and a desperate vision of alienation in postsocialist China.

The film highlighted the director’s trademark techniques and themes, but this time Jia surprised viewers with a thumping electronic music soundtrack by Lim Qiong, dreamlike Flash animation vignettes, and touches of what could almost be described as magic realism. In *Still Life* (2006), Jia again tested the boundaries between fiction film and documentary, while simultaneously pushing his magic realist tendency even further with painted Peking Opera actors, tightrope walkers, and spaceships all intermittently appearing among the ruins of a soon-to-be-submerged city. The film seemed to take Jia’s politics of demolition and destruction, first introduced in *Xiao Wu*, to their ultimate destination, with an entire city slated to be “relocated” in anticipation of the rising level of the Yangtze River due to the Three Gorges Dam project. *Still Life* would go on to win Jia widespread critical acclaim, including a Golden Lion at the Venice Film Festival. As film scholar Dai Jinhua has pointed out, the film was also crucial for its inversion of long-ingrained cinematic themes:

The visual space of *Still Life* has become a “site” in the narrow sense, a temporal appearance of a spatial form. Clearly, within the range of Chinese art cinema, or rather in the tradition of post-Mao film, *Still Life* is the first to accomplish the inversion of cultural and visual themes of fifth-generation Chinese cinema (or rather fifth-generation style film). No longer is space given priority over time, and no longer is the time of progress, reform, and life swallowed by Chinese historical and geographical space. Rather, it is temporality, that is to say development or progress, that sweeps away historical and natural spaces like a hurricane and rewrites them, as if once again corroborating a compressed experience of time: contemporary China experienced four hundred years of European capitalist history, from the Enlightenment to the critique of modernity in the thirty years leading up to the turn of this century.¹

Besides its important intervention into temporality, *Still Life* also continued the director's complex investigation into the relationship between documentary film and narrative film storytelling. In *Still Life*, this was demonstrated not only through the use of real locations and nonprofessional actors but also through the film's connection with a companion documentary film, *Dong*, part of which focused on painter Liu Xiaodong's portraits of workers and residents in the same city.

Continuing to alternate between feature films and documentaries, Jia made two more feature-length documentary films, *Useless* in 2007 and *I Wish I Knew*, which was produced in cooperation with the 2010 Shanghai Expo. His film *24 City* (2008) again played with the line between documentary and fictional filmmaking, casting professional actors like Joan Chen and Zhao Tao alongside retired factory workers, who were the real-life interview subjects whose stories inspired the film. Jia's *24 City* was a nostalgic look back at the factory system of socialist China and the fate of the workers whose lives were once entirely bound by the structure of the factory work unit. Like *Still Life*, which depicted the literal drowning of the entire city of Fengjie, *24 City* is a portrait of disappearance. As Corey Kai Nelson Schultz observes: "The film creates 'portraits in performance' and 'memories in performance' which use history, memory, and emotion to construct a felt history of the worker class on the eve of its extinction. This creates a structure of feeling that ultimately commemorates and elegizes this group's irrevocable decline and disappearance in the Reform era, and mourns the class by placing it in the past."²² In 2013, Jia Zhangke released what was perhaps his most controversial film, testing his sometimes-tenuous relationship with China's film censors. Inspired by a series of real-life news reports, *A Touch of Sin* documented a group of loosely intertwined stories about individuals frustrated, abused, exploited, or otherwise disenfranchised by society. In each of the stories, individuals pushed to the limit explode—or implode—triggering a series of violent acts that captured the disenchantment and frustrations lurking just beneath the surface of economic prosperity.

Mountains May Depart saw Jia return again to his hometown of Fenyang, but rather than a nostalgic vision of the past, Jia presented—for the first time in his body of work—a vision of the future. Like *Platform* fifteen years earlier, *Mountains May Depart* provided a sweeping narrative perspective from which to meditate on loss and change. These would also be some of the themes that Jia would pick up again in 2018 with *Ash Is Purest White*, which followed two self-styled gangsters as they navigate prison, illness, aging, and the loss of central values like brotherhood and loyalty in favor of a social

economy that runs on money. Literally called “Sons and Daughters of Jianghu” in Chinese, *Ash Is Purest White* directly references *jianghu*, a concept that has been important throughout Jia’s body of work. The term traditionally refers to the realm outside mainstream society where heroes and villains operate according to their own codes of righteousness and loyalty, which has been the setting for countless stories from *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu zhuan*) to the modern martial arts novels of Jin Yong. But *jianghu* can also point to a form of social bonding centered around notions of brotherhood and often displayed in modern martial arts and gangster films. While inspired by the 1980s gangster films of John Woo, Jia’s reinterpretation of the *jianghu* genre is devoid of MTV-style editing, two-handed gun battles, white doves, and other melodramatic flourishes; instead, *Ash Is Purest White* offers what can almost be thought of as a deconstruction of the gangster genre. Chases and gunfights are replaced by searching and waiting; slow-motion action set pieces are replaced by slow cinema aesthetics; the male-centered bonding and misogynist undercurrent of many *jianghu* films are displaced by a strong central female character; and, by the time the surveillance cameras go up at the end of the film, we know that, under the watchful eye of the state, there is no longer space for this *jianghu* to survive.

From the martial arts extravaganzas *Hero* (*Yingxiong*, 2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (*Shimian maifu*, 2004), and *The Promise* (*Wuji*, 2005), to aestheticized visions of urban consumption in *Tiny Times* (*Xiao shidai*, 2013), to escapist fantasy films like *Monster Hunt* (*Zhuoyao ji*, 2015) and *The Mermaid* (*Meirenyu*, 2016) or even nationalist-fueled action cinema like *Wolf Warrior II* (*Zhanlang II*, 2017), Chinese cinema today has largely turned its back on the more experimental roots of the Fifth Generation and the Sixth Generation in the 1980s and 1990s. Today the Chinese film industry finds itself deeply entrenched in a third phase that is utterly dominated by the juggernaut of commercial cinema. But while the industry bulldozes forward into commercial cinematic forms and genres, Jia and his collaborators have homed in on that space between socialism and capitalism, destruction and revitalization. This liminal space is inhabited by marginal characters—dancers and drifters, prostitutes and pickpockets. Feeling a disconnect between the protagonists depicted in most Chinese-language films, Jia set out to create a world populated by figures he could relate to. As Jia explains: “I increasingly feel that the single most difficult thing in film is to create a new image of what a protagonist should be. That is where the absolute heart of cinematic innovation lies. You need to create a new type of person and capture that new character on film” (chapter 2).

Over the course of his films to date, Jia has indeed created some of the most recognizable characters in the history of Chinese cinema—Xiao Wu, the naive pickpocket who stubbornly lives by his own code of ethics even as he is swallowed up by a still larger world of swindlers and thieves; Cui Mingliang, whose youthful fire and idealism of the early 1980s gradually die off as he settles into middle age; Han Sanming, who silently searches the ruins of a doomed city in search of his long-lost wife; or Shen Tao, who struggles to navigate the complex web of relationships with the men in her life and later her son. Jia's creation of these and other characters—often those left behind amid China's economic revolution—can be seen as an active stance in his cinematic project to refocus the story of China's transformation.

The protagonists highlighted in Jia's films function as a revisionist intervention into both socialist soldier heroes like Dong Cunrui and Lei Feng, whose image dominated the cinematic imagination during the period when Jia was still a small child, and lead-actor tropes from both Hollywood and mainstream Chinese commercial cinema. Instead, Jia's characters reflect a sense of rootlessness, displacement, and wandering; they struggle to find their place in society; relationships are riddled with miscommunication, lies, and disappointment; and textbook cinematic devices often used to provide characters with "closure," "happy endings," and "resolution" are almost always withheld. This intervention, which has played out across his films over twenty-five years, has had a pervasive impact on the collective imagination of what on-screen representation looks like in Chinese cinema. These are voices from the subaltern that Jia's films have rendered visible, identifiable, and human.³ Part of the director's insistence on highlighting perspectives that had been rendered invisible over the course of much of China's cinematic history comes from Jia's self-identification as a "folk director," a "grassroots director," or, as Li Yang and others have described him, a "migrant filmmaker."⁴ At the same time, Jia Zhangke himself has spoken eloquently about how refocusing our attention on a different set of protagonists on-screen can almost be thought of as an intervention that attempts to retrain audience conceptions about the very notion of "marginality": "I don't agree with the claim that our films are about 'marginal' figures in society. . . . I feel these issues actually concern the majority of Chinese. These characters, therefore, are ordinary, not 'marginal.' The notion of marginality refers to something alienated from the center and the mainstream. Out of the city, however, what is the mainstream of Chinese society? How does the Chinese majority live? If you think my characters are 'marginal,' then the majority of the Chinese could also be labeled 'marginal.'"⁵

This refocusing can be seen not only through the types of characters Jia features but also through the environment in which he positions them. For decades, the vast majority of Chinese-language films—and films about China produced in the West, for that matter—were set in one of two locales, the countryside or the city. Over time, a visual shorthand came to be projected on these locations as they took on often overly simplistic symbolic meanings—the city as stand-in for modernity, alienation, and westernization while the countryside represented tradition, community, and cultural roots. But in a bold move, Jia drew his viewers' attention to the often-neglected provincial towns and smaller-scale cities off the beaten path of development. Jia began with his hometown of Fenyang in Shanxi Province, the setting for *Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, and later *Mountains Will Depart*. This attention to liminal spaces can be seen not only in the macro-locations of his films (Fenyang, Datong, Fengjie, etc.), but also on a micro-level in the actual spaces where he shoots, with locations such as street-side noodle stalls, bus station waiting rooms, and illegal gambling houses also highlighting a sense of “in between.” Liminality is further displayed, enhanced even, not only through the locations but through their very disappearance, which plays out in the camera's repeated interest in documenting destruction, demolition, and construction.

Throughout Jia's films one can find backdrops of buildings being torn down, sweeping expanses of rubble and waste. These images further isolate the already marginalized characters, destabilizing them and alienating them from their surroundings. These powerful images of desolation and destruction can even be seen as refracted allegorical portraits of Jia's protagonists, who themselves navigate the same treacherous transformation as their environment. Along the way, careful viewers can see the signposts of the abandoned socialist utopia—faded political slogans hiding in the backdrop in *Platform*, ruins of old Soviet-style apartment buildings in *Unknown Pleasures*, or the factory that takes center stage to make room for a modern real estate enterprise in *24 City*. Eventually, Jia's cinematic portrayal of Fenyang would take on a looming presence in his body of work, like Joyce's Dublin, Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, or Mo Yan's Northeast Gaomi County. The liminal space of Fenyang would later be expanded to other locales—such as Datong in *Unknown Pleasures*, Chengdu in *24 City*, or Dongguan in *Touch of Sin*. But nowhere provided a more ideal canvas for Jia's meditation on transformation than the drowning city of Fengjie in *Still Life*, *Dong*, and *Ash Is Purest White*. Cecilia Mello has observed that Jia is conscious “of how a disappearing space implies the loss of memory. From this, he derives an urgency to

film these spaces and these memories, felt to be always on the cusp of disappearance. At the same time, he cultivates a seemingly contradictory slowness in observation, almost as an act of resistance in the face of the speed of transformations, which he regards as a ‘form of violence,’ imbued with a ‘destructive nature.’”⁶

Equally remarkable as the characters and places he depicts in his body of work is the cinematic form he appropriates; content to settle into the uncomfortable space *between*, allowing his camera to linger on the unsettling space of transition itself. This in-between space speaks to a longing nostalgia toward the socialist world being abandoned while projecting an uneasiness about the uncertain future rapidly rising up to take its place. While Chen Kaige, the director of *Yellow Earth*, the very film that first inspired Jia’s cinematic epiphany, has long eschewed the experimental filmmaking of his early days in favor of more mainstream commercial fare, Jia Zhangke has continued to take up the mantle of Chinese art cinema. Going against the current of the mainstream, Jia continues to make films that ask difficult questions and push the boundaries of cinematic form: one can see subtle intertextual bleeds between his own films, which function like a nuanced cinematic conversation: hints of the martial arts film genre in *Touch of Sin*, echoes of science fiction in *Still Life*, shadows of the 1980s Hong Kong gangster film in *Ash Is Purest White*, and a probing interrogation between the boundaries of narrative film and documentary. He experiments with different mediums—16mm, 35mm, digital—and different genres, and over time has created a cinematic vocabulary that is all his own.

In dissecting the philosophical underpinnings of the director’s formal approach to filmmaking, film scholar Qi Wang has offered the following insight:

Jia Zhangke exercises what I call “subjective metanarrative vision” and creates conscious subject positions for the spectator to encounter cinematic representations of past and present. The encounter is an epistemological experience of the “superficial” nature of time and space: traces left on the surface of a wall as an embodiment of the past and debris as a spatial index of the memory of space, for instance. In the face of the richly suggestive surface of the present pregnant with the past, Jia’s camera remains non-intruding yet attentive, anonymous yet conscious, placing the spectator in a sensitive position, from where cinematic interventions and the real historical world informing them are seen and experienced simultaneously as a whole.⁷

Wang's description allows us to appreciate a key facet of Jia Zhangke's film style, which is at once seemingly detached and observational yet somehow "conscious." And it is through this visual consciousness that viewers are invited to experience the subjects as being thoroughly rooted in time, even as Jia repeatedly reminds us of how history, and time itself for that matter, is continually being broken down and stripped away. While many of the other early Sixth Generation filmmakers became known for their "on-the-spot realism," Jia went further than anyone else in rooting his camera's documentary-like captures of the here and now inside a larger meditation on the passage of time.

Another facet that sets Jia apart from his contemporaries is the way he has self-consciously positioned himself as one of contemporary China's leading public intellectuals. Jia's documentary films have garnered almost as much critical acclaim as his feature films. He is a popular public speaker who appears frequently on Chinese talk shows and lecture tours. In addition, he is a prolific essay writer and has published more than half a dozen companion books related to his films, such as a collection of interviews with workers released in conjunction with *24 City*, various screenplays, and the highly acclaimed two-volume collection *Jia Xiang* (the first volume is available in English under the title *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*). Jia has run his own production company, Xstream Pictures, since 2006 and serves as a prolific producer, fostering the work of several other up-and-coming directors like Han Jie, Diao Yinan, and the poet Han Dong. Jia appears in Hitchcock-esque cameos in nearly all of his feature films and has also appeared in cameo roles in films by Han Han and other directors.

However, since 2012, Jia's film activities have taken on a markedly entrepreneurial flavor. In 2012, he became the second-largest investor in Turn East Media (Yihui chuanmei), a company involved in developing television, film, and variety shows. In 2015, Jia formed Fabula Entertainment (Shanghai nuanliu wenhua chuanmei) with Cao Guoxiong, Wang Hong, and Wu Xiaobo, a company aimed at "film-related lifestyle building." And in 2016 Jia registered three new companies in his hometown of Fenyang: Fenyang Jia Zhangke Arts Center, Fenyang Zhongzi Film Exhibition, and Shanxi Mountains May Department Food and Beverage. The following year, he founded the Pingyao Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon International Film Festival, which in just a few short years has developed into one of the most dynamic and influential independent film festivals in China. Two decades after Fenyang first appeared on-screen in *Xiao Wu*, Jia Zhangke seemed determined to reinvent his hometown as a major hub for cinema and the

arts via theater construction, cafés, an arts center, and his own film festival. Perhaps one of the most notable shifts in Jia's public persona came in 2018 when the onetime underground director was elected a deputy of the National People's Congress, the highest organ of state power in China. All of this points to Jia's enormous impact on the contemporary Chinese cultural scene and his transformation into a cultural critic, a producer, a film mogul, and ultimately even a politician. However, it seems uncanny that a director whose films once championed the underdog and leveled unflinching criticism at the mechanisms of power that create alienation and oppression now finds himself situated at the very center of those corporate and state centers of power. At the same time, within Jia's body of work we witness a telling synthesis of the three phases of Chinese film history mentioned at the beginning of this introduction: socialist cinema, art house film, and commercial cinema. Throughout Jia's body of work, we have seen a keen engagement with the fate of socialist China's legacy, and experimental or New Wave cinema has always been the primary language through which Jia has expressed his attachments, concern, and often suspicions about China's socialist legacy in the Reform Era. However, his more recent commercial and entrepreneurial activities are telling indicators that even someone once described as a "migrant director" and as "A Director for the People from China's Lower Class" cannot escape the uncompromising commercial nature of Chinese film culture today. It also begs the question as to whether Jia's commercial activities are used to fund his art house films or that instead his cultural activities are used to leverage bigger business moves. However, as Dai Jinhua reminds us in her afterword to this book, a big part of Jia Zhangke's contribution has been breaking down binaries, and not falling into them.

All the while, Jia Zhangke's voyage from Fenyang to the world needs to be considered not only within the context of contemporary Chinese film history but also through the director's engagements with global art cinema. As scholars like Jason McGrath and Li Yang have observed, Jia's style of aesthetic realism can be seen as a marriage between the dual influences of post-socialist realism in Chinese fiction and documentary films from the 1990s and the tradition of international art house cinema.⁸ Stressing the "synergy" between these two forces, Li Yang argues that "it was Jia's ingenious blending of gritty realism and formalism to address contemporary social issues in unmistakable aestheticism, that ultimately produced his success and the lasting power of the new realist style."⁹ But Jia Zhangke's interface with the international art house film movement went far beyond its influence on him

as a young director. Perhaps more than any other contemporary Chinese filmmaker, Jia Zhangke not only has been embraced by the global network of elite film festivals, from Venice to Cannes and from New York to Tokyo, but has become a central figure in that world. Jia has been awarded prestigious prizes such as the Golden Lion at Venice for *Still Life*, and five of his films have been screened in competition at Cannes. Whereas *Yellow Earth* may have been the film that ignited his early interest in cinema, he would go on to study the works of Ozu, Hou, Antonioni, and Bresson. More commercially minded directors like Martin Scorsese and John Woo would also leave their mark on Jia's aesthetic. Jia came to perfect a style and cinematic diction that firmly positioned him alongside the auteur masters of the global art house tradition. In fact, Jia further enmeshed himself in this world through active collaborations with figures like Eric Gautier (cinematographer for filmmakers like Agnes Varda, Olivier Assayas, and Hirokazu Koreeda); Matthieu Laclau (French film editor who has worked with Jia since 2013); Lim Qiong (Taiwanese composer and frequent collaborator with Hou Hsiao-hsien); and Shozo Ichiyama (Japanese producer who has also worked extensively with Hou). Jia has even had the global art house camera turned on him when he became the subject of a documentary by Walter Salles, the Brazilian director of films such as *The Motorcycle Diaries* (2004), *Dark Water* (2005), and *On the Road* (2012). The resulting film, *Jia Zhang-ke, A Guy from Fenyang* (2016), was screened at Berlin and helped to further establish Jia as part of the canon of global art house cinema.

To understand Jia's political positioning, body of work, and aesthetic signature, it is essential to position him within the dual environments of the local Chinese film industry and international art house cinema. Between these two poles, Jia's body of work takes on conflicting meanings and alternative arcs of reception and dissemination. The tensions between these two worlds can be seen through his first three films—*Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, and *Unknown Pleasures*—which were embraced by the international art house community while being commercially restricted in China. They can also be seen through the complex lines Jia walks when he accepts Chinese projects like the documentary *I Wish I Knew* (2010), which was commissioned by the Shanghai World Expo, or corporate projects like directing a 2019 iPhone X commercial or opening the 2020 Prada Mode show in Shanghai. Perhaps the example that best crystallizes these tensions is *A Touch of Sin* (2013), which was recognized by Cannes and even selected by the *New York Times* as one of the best twenty-five films of the twenty-first century even though, as of 2021, the film had yet to be commercially distributed in China. Another

example of these tensions was revealed in October 2020 when Jia suddenly announced that he and his team were stepping away from the Pingyao Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon International Film Festival, which had just completed its fourth run. While no clear explanation was given for why he felt the festival needed to be “unburdened from the shadow of Jia Zhangke,”¹⁰ lurking behind the announcement were certainly deeper tensions between state-sponsored film festival models in China and a politically unfettered vision of what a true *independent* film festival can be. This results in two Jia Zhangkes or, at the very least, two different bodies of work and artistic personas between China and the West. While a film like *A Touch of Sin* may be absent from Chinese theaters, Jia’s shorts and numerous producing activities have left a powerful mark on the industry in China, all of which is largely invisible to Western viewers. At the same time, Jia’s previously discussed persona as a public intellectual, cultural entrepreneur, and political player is also largely left out of his presence in the West, where he is still received primarily as an auteur of pure cinema. But one of the reasons Jia Zhangke has managed to flourish as a filmmaker, even under the crushing tide of commercial cinema in mainland China over the past two decades, is because he has been able to so successfully navigate these two poles, from the Chinese film market to the global art house, standing up for an uncompromising artistic vision while traversing the complexities of censorship and shareholders, from Fenyang to the world.

WHILE THIS BOOK PROJECT came together fairly quickly, with the majority of conversations recorded over the span of one week in 2019, in some sense it took much longer because the book includes interview content recorded as early as 2002 and as recently as 2021. Jia Zhangke began making films just a few years after my first trip to China, and his work has been a core part of my academic life for the past twenty years. I started taking note of Jia’s films in the late 1990s, when I was a PhD student at Columbia University. I first watched *Xiao Wu* and *Platform* on poor-quality VCDs and later in their proper format at the Film Society of Lincoln Center. Those films had a tremendous impact on me during those years, partly for their sophisticated use of film language, their powerful images, and the humanistic portrayal of characters but also because the world they portrayed was so close to my personal memories from my time as a foreign student in China during the early and mid-1990s. While I had seen dozens of Chinese films from that period, none of them captured the sights and sounds, spaces and faces of 1990s China like *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*.

I had the opportunity to finally meet Jia Zhangke in 2002 when he traveled to New York with his producer Chow Keung for the New York Film Festival, where *Unknown Pleasures* was screening. I served as Jia's interpreter, handling all of the postscreening Q&As, various press interviews, and even an unforgettable private meeting with Martin Scorsese. I also managed to squeeze in my own two-and-a-half-hour interview with Jia, which was published in *Film Comment* and later reprinted in my first book, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. Gradually, Jia's films became an increasingly important part of my teaching and research; I would use his films in my classes and even taught a graduate seminar on his entire body of work. In 2009, I published the first English-language monograph on Jia: *Jia Zhangke's Hometown Trilogy: Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, which was included in the British Film Institute's Contemporary Classics series. Five years later, Jia wrote a preface to my full-length interview book with Hou Hsiao-hsien, *Boiling the Sea: Hou Hsiao-hsien's Memories of Shadows and Light*. Thus, much of my work has somehow been linked to Jia Zhangke.

In 2017, my colleagues Susan Jain from the UCLA Confucius Institute, Paul Malcom from the UCLA Film and Television Archive, and curator Cheng-Sim Lim were beginning to plan for the 2018 China Onscreen Biennial. I suggested inviting Jia Zhangke, but the idea was not to simply screen his new film *Ash Is Purest White*, but to create an artist-in-residence program around which we could program a series of screenings, dialogues, and a master class with UCLA film students. The other motivation behind this program was this book—to produce a record of discussions with Jia on cinema that would take place during his visit.

During the Jia Zhangke retrospective at UCLA, we screened eight of Jia's films over the course of five nights: *Xiao Shan Going Home*, *Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *The World*, *Still Life*, the short film *Revive*, *A Touch of Sin*, and *Ash Is Purest White*. Besides the first night, each of the subsequent four screenings was followed by a 90-to-120-minute dialogue. Jia also participated in a two-hour master class, which was conducted as part of our running conversation but was more focused on issues of professionalization and film technique. In February 2019, on the eve of the official US commercial release of *Ash Is Purest White*, Jia and I were able to record two additional conversations at the UC Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive (BAMPFA) on February 10 and at the Asia Society Southern California on February 12. Then on June 3, 2021, Jia Zhangke and I engaged in an online dialogue to discuss his documentary film *Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue* (2020). These more

than thirteen hours of conversations, combined with some material from our 2002 interview, form the basis of this book.

Jia Zhangke on Jia Zhangke is divided into six chapters, which in large part chronologically follow the director's body of work. Chapter 1, "A Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man," focuses on Jia's formative years, his comments on film music, his student films, and reflections on some of his primary collaborators, such as cinematographer Yu Lik-Wai. The second chapter, "The Hometown Trilogy," centers on Jia's first three feature films: *Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, and *Unknown Pleasures*. The third chapter, "Documenting Destruction and Building Worlds," is devoted to *The World* and *Still Life*, two films that are generally regarded as important works in the transition of Jia's style and engagement with the Chinese market. Chapter 4, "Film as Social Justice," explores *24 City* and the controversial *A Touch of Sin*. Chapter 5, "Return to Jianghu," primarily engages with *Ash Is Purest While*, with some discussion of *Mountains May Depart*. Chapter 6, "Toward an Accented Cinema," is drawn largely from Jia Zhangke's master class with UCLA film students. This chapter begins with Jia's reflections on his time as a film student at the Beijing Film Academy and a detailed account of his own student film *Xiao Shan Going Home* before moving on to discuss the aesthetic principles of designing an opening shot (by way of *Still Life* as an example) and concludes with his advice to young filmmakers. The book concludes with a coda, "To the Sea," which uses Jia's documentary film *Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue* to reflect on the relationship between literature and film in modern China, Jia's approach to documentary filmmaking, and film structure.

The fact that most of the dialogue included here originally took place in a public forum inevitably had an impact on the content of this book. In a private interview setting, one has more freedom to explore highly specialized topics, pursue points that would otherwise be brushed aside, and gradually ease into sensitive topics. In public dialogues, the presence of the audience immediately alters the nature of the conversation; the audience brings a certain energy to the forum, while at the same time, one becomes more sensitive to the constraints of time, audience engagement, and technical matters of interpretation. I also realized that the public forum tended to bring out Jia Zhangke's witty side, whereas he was much more serious and reflective during our private interviews. Most of the dialogue was tied to film screenings, which also had a direct impact on the content: for instance, films not screened at UCLA during Jia's visit—such as *Unknown Pleasures* and *Mountains May Depart*—are discussed in far less detail than films in the series. And while we did discuss his views on documentary filmmaking via

Swimming Out Till the Sea Turns Blue, there is relatively limited extended analysis or discussion of his main documentary films, *Dong*, *Useless*, and *I Wish I Knew*. Instead, most of the dialogue is focused on his feature films, with special emphasis on his major works. Over the course of this extended dialogue, certain themes are revisited and expanded on with new details and nuances: the art of working with actors, intertextuality between his films, the shifting meaning of music in film, and the importance of various sites—like his hometown of Fenyang—in his work. Limitations aside, this book contains the single most extensive collection of interviews with Jia on his life, major works, and views on cinematic art.