

Afterword

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Translated by Michael Berry

JIA ZHANGKE ON JIA ZHANGKE might surprisingly expose something quite deep about Chinese cinema as we are situated here in 2020, a year still playing out, that is destined to be recorded in history and remembered.

This is a narrative carried out through conversation, and over the course of the memories recalled, the story of a film director is told: his personal story—which everyone seems to have heard about, yet no one truly knows; his creative life—from what is nakedly displayed before the camera to what is hidden behind the scenes. Beginning during the final years of the twentieth century and running through the first two decades of the twenty-first century, Jia Zhangke's films have unfolded and provided a consistent thread through which to tie these two eras together, from the youthful and unyielding spirit of “independent cinema” where he first built his reputation to the point when his career ran parallel with the rise of the Chinese film industry. This is also a story whose form and meaning are revealed through dialogue: a story about film, art, artistic creation, and the choices that artists make. At the same time, it is a story about the river of life, tracing its movement through the rapids and winding corridors and its encounters with the shore.

Over the course of the past few decades, Jia Zhangke's films have left a record of the key threads running through some of contemporary China's most unusual stories. Initially he was unable to show his work in Chinese theaters and official screening venues; instead, he was met only with challenges.

Thus, he was forced to go through the “narrow gate” of the European film festival circuit, eventually succeeding Zhang Yimou and Zhang Yuan as a name synonymous with “Chinese film” in the world of international art house cinema. From there, as the Chinese film industry witnessed its own resurgence and process of rejuvenation, Jia Zhangke would experience all kinds of interactions (and sometimes clashes) with the commercial side of the industry up until the present day in which he is now regarded as one of the shining stars of Chinese cinema. However, the meaning of Jia Zhangke lies not in identifying a different culture or a different phase in film history, nor in describing or clarifying those binary symbols that had for so long been projected on the coordinates of Chinese cinema: art versus commerce, international film festivals versus the local Chinese market, the city versus the country, the super metropolis versus the small inland town, “Mandarin Chinese” versus local dialects, independent versus official, “auteur” film versus genre film, or documentary film versus fiction film. Through it all, Jia Zhangke has persistently held true to his ideals, flexibly adapting to changes along the way. Rather than saying he has described or clarified these binaries, it would be more fitting to understand Jia’s films as continually clashing with, and sometimes cutting through, those mutually opposing binaries and seemingly fixed dividing lines. There seems to be an established consensus on Jia Zhangke’s identity as a “Chinese auteur,” and yet he himself does not seem at all attached or committed to a single “signature style.” Instead, he repeatedly translates his interactions with China and the world into film and, in the process, quietly extends the very boundaries of what cinema can be. Jia Zhangke’s “Fenyang” thus becomes a site that is highly distinctive and brimming with rich details. All this makes *Jia Zhangke on Jia Zhangke* all the more interesting.

In these interviews that Michael Berry has conducted and recorded, our attention is drawn from the outside to the inside as we gaze toward China, film, art, and ultimately Jia Zhangke as he responds and reflects. Along the way, Berry intently listens as he tries to capture and identify the various “accents” that are spoken. Is this a Chinese accent or a Fenyang accent from Shanxi? But he seems to be more interested in the accent of the individual, the accent of art, the accent of film, and the accent of style. He is interested in hearing Jia Zhangke’s voice, hearing his “accent.” Pushing the interviewer forward and supporting the conversation is a rich genealogy of knowledge concerning film art, art house cinema, and film auteurs or, as we might call them, film artists. Through these interviews, Jia Zhangke responds to questions and thinks back, reflecting on moments on set and moments in life, ar-

tistic decisions and happenstance occurrences, his understanding of things and various misreadings. And through the questions and answers contained within this book you can also see the “faith” and “suspicions” lingering when it comes to art/film art; the deep respect a scholar holds for the artist/auteur/director; the artist’s willingness to answer the questions of the researcher; and the humor, informal comfort, and deep connection between a filmmaker and his friend. Undoubtedly, there is also a sense of dislocation and fluctuation as we move from “inside” to “outside.” To gaze at Jia Zhangke’s films is to gaze not only into the small city of Fenyang but also into one part of contemporary China. On the margins of those international metropolises, you find these small provincial cities where you will discover nameless individuals and floating laborers, but these were never really ever “alien places” or “somewhere else.” Ever since the time that Jia Zhangke’s films first appeared, the movement behind China’s radical transformation and “great migration” toward globalization has begun to spill “inward,” beginning in places like Fenyang and extending outward, unfolding like a scroll of moving images. Perhaps in some ways this book represents overlapping conversations and perspectives about “inside” and “outside.” The book is not simply an American scholar of Chinese literature’s focus on a Chinese film director; it also represents the expression of an overlap between “the external side of what’s inside” and “the internal side of what’s outside.” It is just like the UFO lingering in the sky in *Still Life* or the “worldly” bullets loaded into a theme park. During that unique period of transition between centuries, between the rush hour of China’s hundred years of modernization and the period of intermission as they prepared to change the stage; it was during this period that “the West” was suddenly no longer regarded as some distant, faraway place; it had already taken its place deep in our cultural self-consciousness. At the same time, China was no longer an “Other” space to be controlled by Europe and America; it was now at the cutting edge of the modern world. In the form of the dialogue contained here, through these interlocking perspectives, the story of Fenyang is always the story of China, as it is also the story of the world under globalization. We set out from the platform and, strolling through the crowds of people, look down from the cliffs in Fengjie and see the “Shanxi” mines and those sons and daughters of *jianghu* wandering about the modern cities, and though it is hanging right there on a string around their very necks, they still can’t find the key to get home . . .

Perhaps at the turn of the century, during this moment in Chinese cinematic and cultural history, Jia Zhangke, his classmates, and people from his generation consciously or unconsciously began to transform how Chinese

films tell their story. We began with the Fifth Generation, for whom space, ritual aesthetics of historical commemoration, and wandering lives were caught in time; what came later was a process of transformation through which people came to distinguish between their frozen imagination about China and the hyperfast, ultramodern reality of what China had become. Of course, Jia Zhangke also attempts to traverse time itself in order to capture remnants of a quickly fading past, yet as his films race toward the river of time, it is perhaps only from the future that we can capture a true still life image of what we have seen. Jia Zhangke may not be an old-fashioned storyteller, yet in this book he offers us the story of his films' stories. In responding to Michael Berry's questions, he recounts, reflects, and states his views. Sometimes, he sidesteps, offering subtle counterstatements or self-defensive comments. It is through these moments that we can catch a glimpse of the continuities and fissures between film time, narrative time, and world time.

It is 2020, and as the demonic shadow of COVID-19 continues to haunt the world, we attempt to restart the clock of modernity. And here arrives a book of conversations about cinema, situating itself amid a fissure whose lines and scope are still not yet clear; a book of memories about cinema, which is, after all, "an installation of memories."

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