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Can China's Leading Indie Film Director Cross Over in America?

A ChinaFile Conversation

JONATHAN LANDRETH, MICHAEL BERRY, JAIME WOLF, RICHARD PEÑA, SUN YUNFAN, YING ZHU, MAYA E. RUDOLPH 09.27.13



Kino Lorber, Inc

Zhao Tao as Xiao Yu in "A Touch of Sin," a film by Jia Zhangke.

Jonathan Landreth:

Chinese writer and director Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* won the prize for the best screenplay at the Cannes Film Festival in May. Though the dialogue and its fine translation and English subtitles by Tony Rayns are exemplary, I found that as the screening room lights came up I was left thinking most about what the film does not say.

A Touch of Sin will have its North American premiere on September 28 at the New York Film Festival and will go on to a limited release by distributor Kino Lorber on October 4 in New York, October 11 in Los Angeles and November 15 in Chicago.

As many of Jia's previous films have done—*Platform*, in particular, rushes to mind—*A Touch of Sin* leaves plenty of silent time and space from which the audience must draw conclusions about that which they've just eyewitnessed. Jia's new work is a powerful, fictionalized weaving together of the true stories of three recent murders and a suicide that took place across China. These are brutal and sad stories about which American audiences will have heard little or nothing. *A Touch of Sin* is important in that regard. It tackles the violence of China's society head on.

But Jia leaves out what happens to killers after their crimes. As such, I can't wait to see Jia during his **live public appearance at the Asia Society in New York on September 30**, a visit that will afford Gotham's committed audience of sino- and cinephiles a chance to ask him why he skipped that part of the discussion of crime and punishment in China,

Jonathan Landreth



Jonathan Landreth reported freelance from Beijing from 2004 to 2012 for The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal, Forbes, The China Economic Quarterly, The Los Angeles Times,...

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the country that, according to the Dui Hui Foundation, **executes more human beings each year than any other on earth.**

Don't get me wrong: Jia's focus in *A Touch of Sin* on the conditions that drive each of the film's four protagonists to their bloody deeds is a courageous use of the medium. In China, citizens often are impugned or punished for using mass media to expose the injustice that often drives people to violence. The mere making of the film challenges the facade of harmonious society that Chinese authorities labor to maintain.

But I was left wondering if Jia left out the capture, trial and punishment of the killers in the film because a frank portrayal of China's criminal justice system is **still too sensitive for the censors?**

Perhaps. In recent days China's popular weibo microblogs have hosted an outpouring of discussion of the **execution of an impoverished street vendor** who claimed he killed in self defense. Threads of the heated online discussion have touched upon the case of **Gu Kailai**, the powerful businesswoman who was sentenced to prison for murder, thus escaping the death penalty, just like her husband, **Bo Xilai**, who last week got life in jail for corruption, abuse of power and bribery.

Because *A Touch of Sin* shines a harsh light on different levels of despair at different rungs of China's socio-economic ladder, I, for one, will be surprised if the graphically gory two-hour-and-five-minute film makes it on to screens in mainland China in its entirety, escaping the censors blade.

"Thanks for your concern," Jia wrote to inquiring fans on weibo on September 26. "The domestic release team and I have been trying since May to release *A Touch of Sin* in China, yet it is **an extremely complicated task**. Almost ninety percent of our efforts are focused on domestic release. The film is projected to be released domestically in November, and we're still striving for this."

That *A Touch of Sin* is getting a release at all in the United States is an accomplishment. The violence and despair at injustice at the heart of the film could put viewers in mind of the raging American gun-control debate. If *A Touch of Sin* sparked even a little bit of American identification with the discussion of crime and punishment going on a world and an Internet away I'd call it a hit.

Responses

Michael Berry



As far as indie cinema goes, Jia Zhangke has already made it. Almost all of his films made over the course of the past decade have been distributed in the U.S., he has been awarded some of the most important international film prizes, **retrospectives on his body of work have run at MoMA** and elsewhere, and during the past several years more academic articles have been published on his work than perhaps any other Chinese filmmaker. In this sense, Jia has already been hugely successful in both America as well as many other countries around the globe. His success is also increasingly not just predicated on his own films, but his contributions as a cultural critic, writer, lecturer, and producer.

Of course, for some "making it" is measured by a different set of criteria—directing a top U.S. box-office grossing film like **Hero** or

Ying Zhu



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becoming a pop sensation like **PSY**—but that is not the game Jia is playing. That is not to say he doesn't have a good chance of one day winning an **Academy Award for best foreign language film** or, given the recent surge of Hollywood-China collaborations, helming a big budget co-production, but, at their core, his films still have an independent spirit that is more concerned with exploring the limits of cinematic form and the depths of the human condition than with conquering international box office receipts.

Friday, September 27, 2013 - 3:31pm

Jaime Wolf



Leaving aside for a second the film's deserved New York Film Festival hoopla, the welcome presence of Jia and his wife, the film's star actress Zhao Tao, in New York, and a national release in the U.S., I want to say that I'm especially eager to see what happens with the release of *A Touch of Sin* on the mainland-- I think in some real way its reception and fate in China is almost the only story where the film is concerned.

For one thing, I think if the censors at **SARFT** (or whatever its new steroidally-enhanced **acronym** is) try to suppress it, that would only work to Jia's advantage and create interest and buzz around the film that might not otherwise exist. Given the tone, pacing and general sobriety of Jia's films (despite the sensational and truly shocking aspects of this one), counterposed with the wholesale embrace of commercial fluff at the mainland box office, part of me thinks that if the government were simply to stand back and let the film into theaters, it might actually fall into an art-film black hole while Chinese audiences are busy queueing up for the next installment of *Tiny Times*. The fact that virtually no other mainland director has license to engage seriously with issues of contemporary life in China could work for Jia, and he'll draw a crowd (it could be the Chinese *Natural Born Killers*)--or it could go the opposite way, where audiences won't see the appeal and just stay away. I have no idea what Jia's production company **Xstream** and the **Shanghai Film Group** are doing to promote the film, or to what extent the outspoken posters on *weibo* also plunk down their hard-earned RMB at the multiplex, and I'd really like to know.

Friday, September 27, 2013 - 7:10pm

Richard Peña



To the above the question, I think the answer is that he already has. One problem might be that you (we) might be thinking in old paradigms: the foreign director who becomes somewhat of an accepted artist for more mainstream American audiences. Frankly, this hasn't happened in ages; perhaps only **Pedro Almodóvar** commands some kind of name recognition outside of the "art house" community, and that I think is largely with the the Latin audience.

But say "Jia Zhangke," or "the director of *Platform* or *The World* to your average, relatively well-informed follower of programs at the Film Society of Lincoln Center, MoMA, BAM, Anthology Film Archives, etc., and they will instantly perk up and say something like "he's great" or "I love his films." They will most probably have trouble with his name, but if prodded by the titles of one or two of his films, the enthusiasm will spill out. As I mentioned, I am bringing him to **Columbia University** this week, and my students couldn't be more excited.

Jia is not only a great artist in his own right, but has also become a symbol for a whole generation of Chinese filmmakers who have decided to turn a very critical eye on what is going on in China today, artists working in documentary as well as in fiction. To my mind, he's one of the few truly important filmmakers working

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"Chinese Director Jia Zhangke Reveals Tentative Release Date for 'A Touch of Sin,'" *The Hollywood Reporter*, August 13, 2013

"China Must End Silence on Injustice, Warns Film Director Jia Zhangke," *The Guardian*, June 24, 2013

"Cannes Best Screenplay Winner Jia Zhangke: 'I Want to Bring About Change in China' (Q&A)," *The Hollywood Reporter*, May 28, 2013

"Changing China from Within," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 12, 2010

"The Long Shot," *The New Yorker*, May 11, 2009

"Jia Zhangke Interview," *Film Comment*, March/April 2009

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Monday, September 30, 2013 - 10:43am

Sun Yunfan



On Saturday night, after the U.S. premiere of *A Touch of Sin* at the 51st New York Film Festival, Jia Zhangke reassured the full house audience at Lincoln Center Theatre that the film has already been approved to be released in mainland China. While many are still doubtful, with good reason, that such a confrontational and emotionally evocative film can survive Chinese censors' paranoid standards, it seems to me that the State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio Film and Television (SAPPRFT) is caught between a rock and a hard place. If released in China, there is no doubt in my mind that it would be a box office hit. If banned, people would still find a way to see it. *A Touch of Sin* is an arrow that has already left the bow.

On Chinese social media outlets like the microblog Weibo, the mobile messaging service Wechat, and culture website Douban, a vast and diverse group of people are calling *A Touch of Sin* the most anticipated film of the year, if not many years. This is not because they are all long time fans of Jia Zhangke, who generally is regarded as a director of art house films, but because they all care about the cases of Hu Wenhai, Zhou Kehua, Deng Yujiao, and the Foxconn worker suicides upon which Jia based his new film. Other, similar cases of common Chinese snapping under pressure and committing violent acts—the case of **Yang Jia** and the recent execution of **Xia Junfeng**, to name but two—while not directly addressed in *A Touch of Sin*, are deeply engraved into Chinese people's recent collective memory and might easily be connected by moviegoing minds to the film's themes.

At Lincoln Center on Saturday, Jia said that this film is a breakthrough in that it depicts contemporary events in a *wuxia*, or martial arts hero style. But it clearly has more to do with *xia* (Chinese classic heroes) than with *wu* (martial arts). It reminds me more of the 108 outlaws in *Water Margin* written by Shi Nai'an in the Song dynasty or the five tragic assassins from the *Records of the Grand Historian* written by Sima Qian in the Han dynasty. Why do so many people in today's China regard these violent criminals as heroes? Because there seem to be no other channels to seek justice and transparency in a country where public discussion about "constitution" and "civil society" can send one directly to jail and, increasingly, taxpayer dollars are dedicated to denying citizens access to information.

Exiting the theater, I ran into Jonathan, who had just watched the film for the second time. He believes that Jia's confidence in the domestic release of the film is a sign of something similar to faith. "Jia Zhangke is choosing to be optimistic," he said. I agree; what is there left to do if one believes the situation will never improve? But I also think that the SAPPRFT has good motive to honor its word. Wouldn't it be smarter to release some hot air in a controlled environment like the theaters than to continue covering up an obviously overheated pressure cooker?

Monday, September 30, 2013 - 12:15pm

Ying Zhu



To the question of domestic release, Jia's confidence is not without grounding. *A Touch of Sin* is a collaboration with the Shanghai Film Group (SFG), formerly known as the Shanghai Film Studio, which is one of several veteran studios formerly subsidized by the state that has since been transformed into a state-controlled yet commercially-run media conglomerate. As a state-controlled film group, as opposed to a private film group such as Huayi Brothers, SFG is in a better position to secure state endorsement for its films. It is therefore not a small detail that Jia thanked the Shanghai Film Group for its support when he was handed the best screenplay award at the Cannes Film Festival in May.

A Touch of Sin is not Jia's first collaboration with the SFG either. Their official collaboration started in 2004, when Jia made *The World*, a film that marked his first serious effort at entering the Chinese film market, with the aid of SFG, after years in exile making internationally renowned independent films that mostly were shut out of the domestic market. Jia's unofficial courtship with SFG started as early as in the late 1990s, a period when he struggled to become relevant in the domestic film scene. In fact, when I visited SFG ten years ago, I was told that the studio was establishing a Youth Studio to cultivate young talents, and Jia was one such young talent.

It was a strategic alliance between Jia and SFG as Jia needed SFG to have his back when it came to securing domestic release and investment, and SFG needed a raw talent to help reclaim its cinematic glory/genealogy as the cradle of a more sophisticated Shanghai cinema from an earlier era. Jia was encouraged to cultivate his unique Jia Zhangke brand and to not be bogged down by the lukewarm mainstream SFG fare, as Ren Zhonglun, the head of Shanghai Film Studio, told me during an interview in Shanghai in July. Jia subsequently collaborated with SFG in making *Still Life*. Then in 2008, the SFG-Jia Zhangke Workshop was established formally and produced *24 City* and the documentary *I Wish I Knew*, among other films.

According to Ren, Jia is a highly disciplined filmmaker when it comes to working within budget and on schedule, and his modestly budgeted films are all profitable, some with quite a high profit margin. So it is a win-win strategy for both--Jia is sheltered from having to deal with domestic policy hassles while being guaranteed a certain percentage of financial backing for new projects, and SFG gets to take partial ownership and credit for Jia's international renown. Short of claiming a role akin to Irving Thalberg or David Selznick in their effort in bringing out some of the best classical Hollywood films, the literary scholar-turned studio head Ren is none too modest while describing his relationship with Jia. As Ren puts it, there are (or were) three fruitful partnerships in Chinese cinema, Feng Xiaogang and Wang Zhonglei at the Huayi Brothers, Zhang Yimou and Zhang Weiping at the Beijing New Picture Film (the two Zhangs recently broke off their long-term partnership), and Jia Zhangke and Ren at the SFG. It was promptly made public shortly after Jia won an award at Cannes that Jia had signed a contract to officially join

the Shanghai Film Group.

Despite his close ties with the SFG, I highly doubt that *A Touch of Sin* would be allowed distribution in China without any alterations. But the adjustments could indeed be kept minimal with the help of a state-run film studio.

Monday, September 30, 2013 - 11:11pm

Jonathan Landreth



On Monday night, September 30, at Asia Society New York, Jia surprised me and Yunfan--and I'd bet a great number of others in the audience--when he revealed that he'd told his wife, muse and frequent star actress, Zhao Tao, **to be prepared for *A Touch of Sin* to be his last film in China**; that he might just have to retire after making a film so directly and unprecedentedly about violence in contemporary mainland society.

I'm paraphrasing here, but the gist of what Jia said was that it was his duty as a director to tell the stories of violence he'd read about in the newspapers and on weibo. "I rebel against the restrictions of the film market and political ideology with a camera. I don't have to pick up a gun," is a loose translation of what he told the packed auditorium on Park Avenue.

Jia claimed that his fictionalized chronicling of China's recent upsurge in violence was designed to bring it to light and help stop its further rise. He reminded me—as did a Tweet from a ChinaFile follower—that he'd once declined to appear publicly in Australia alongside the Uighur activist Rebiya Kadeer, who Beijing claimed was responsible for inciting the fatal interethnic riots that rocked west China's largely Muslim Xinjiang region four years ago.

"U praise him [Jia Zhangke] now," wrote @Info_Asymmetry to ChinaFile's Twitter account in apparent sympathy for Kadeer. "When he pulled out of Melbourne Film Festival in 2009, what did u say? Selective reasoning much?"

Well, **Jia met his critics for that decision with reason**, explaining via a statement from his production company, XStream, that he was not well versed in the politics of Xinjiang and had recused himself from the festival so as not to "tarnish" the memories of those many dozens of people (mostly Han Chinese) who died.

And of course, now he has made a film about violence perpetrated by and against members of a group much larger than China's Uighur minority—the nation's poor, people of all ethnic groups, from North to South, who've had it up to their necks with corruption and are driven sometimes to the snapping point.

Tuesday, October 1, 2013 - 12:38am

Maya E. Rudolph



I spent last month in Beijing working with young filmmakers—mostly born after 1980—and I've never heard a group of friends and colleagues express such anticipation for a Chinese film as they did for *A Touch of Sin*. The consensus among the young film crowd in Beijing is that this film has big potential to be a game-changer. This could be the moment that the indie stalwart who refused to compromise finally gets his due at home and

abroad, paving a slightly smoother path for other indie filmmakers. This also could be the moment a real discussion of violence and bureaucracy are splashed across China's big screens causing the weibo posts to fly. But the promised theatrical release in November also could be stymied by the kind of "technical difficulties" that faced Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained in China* earlier this year, or a last-minute slash, or even burn, by the censors.

For a lot of young filmmakers in China, the release and reception of *A Touch of Sin* represents a decisive moment. Jia's career has been a roadmap of what's possible for Chinese independent filmmakers in terms of working both in- and outside the system, telling local stories with global appeal, and gaining international exposure, but domestic acceptance seems to be the toughest nut to crack. For many of my colleagues in China, the way *A Touch of Sin* is perceived in China will do a lot either to bolster or rattle their confidence in forging ahead as indie filmmakers.

Outside the filmmakers' circle, though, I have no doubt that this film will be sought out and scrutinized by Chinese audiences. Recent attempts by Chinese filmmakers to shed light on current events received mixed critical and box office reception. Notable examples include Wang Jing's 2009 film *Invisible Killer* and Chen Kaige's 2012 *Caught in the Web*—both stories of Chinese netizens' quest for justice manifesting in dark and violent events. Their commercial and critical success was mixed, but each film's release stoked the discussion of current events in social media.

As Yunfan discussed above, *A Touch of Sin* so powerfully interprets true events that it will be impossible to ignore in China if it makes it to local theaters. Even if it only ever streams online, illegally, its impact on the next generation of filmmakers will not go unsung.

Tuesday, October 1, 2013 - 1:04pm

Jaime Wolf



Making each film as if it will be your last is pretty much the touchstone of artistic integrity, and it's more than heartening to hear Jia say that. In conversation, or interviews, there is a deceptively plainspoken resonance to what he says that frequently winds up striking the very same tone of his films, and it's never less than impressive. A few years back, while overseeing a special China issue of *Good Magazine*, I commissioned Jia to write an essay, and there too, it came through loud and clear—much as anything visual or thematic, that tone is part of his signature.

At the same time, this is precisely where the release of *A Touch of Sin* in the U.S. and elsewhere, and Jia's success outside China becomes relevant. Why? Because his freedom and license to make films is in part consequent on the fact that he brings China in the form of critical praise, festival awards and other kinds of recognition. Not to mention any box office success that accrues to his films. Being regularly and conspicuously heralded as one of the world's most important filmmakers is a form of insurance against suppression and interference at the hands of the government.

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It's my understanding that Jia is something of a polarizing figure with China's censors—and that while they are susceptible to outside pressure and may grant him approved status, he clearly walks a tightrope. In an interview published before Cannes in **Festivalists**, Tony Rayns hinted somewhat ominously that some other shoe was poised to drop. In that regard, I think it was also important that Jia launch the film at Cannes and in New York, and in as many high-profile venues outside of China before premiering it there.


Tuesday, October 1, 2013 - 1:21pm

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