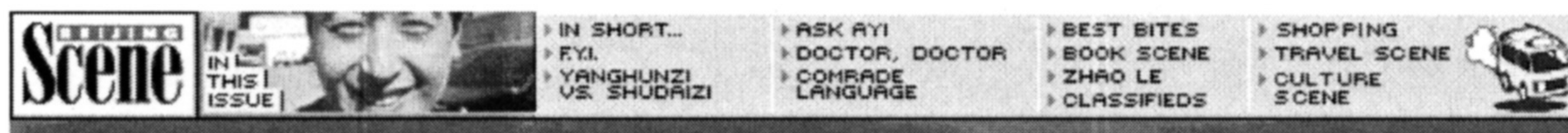


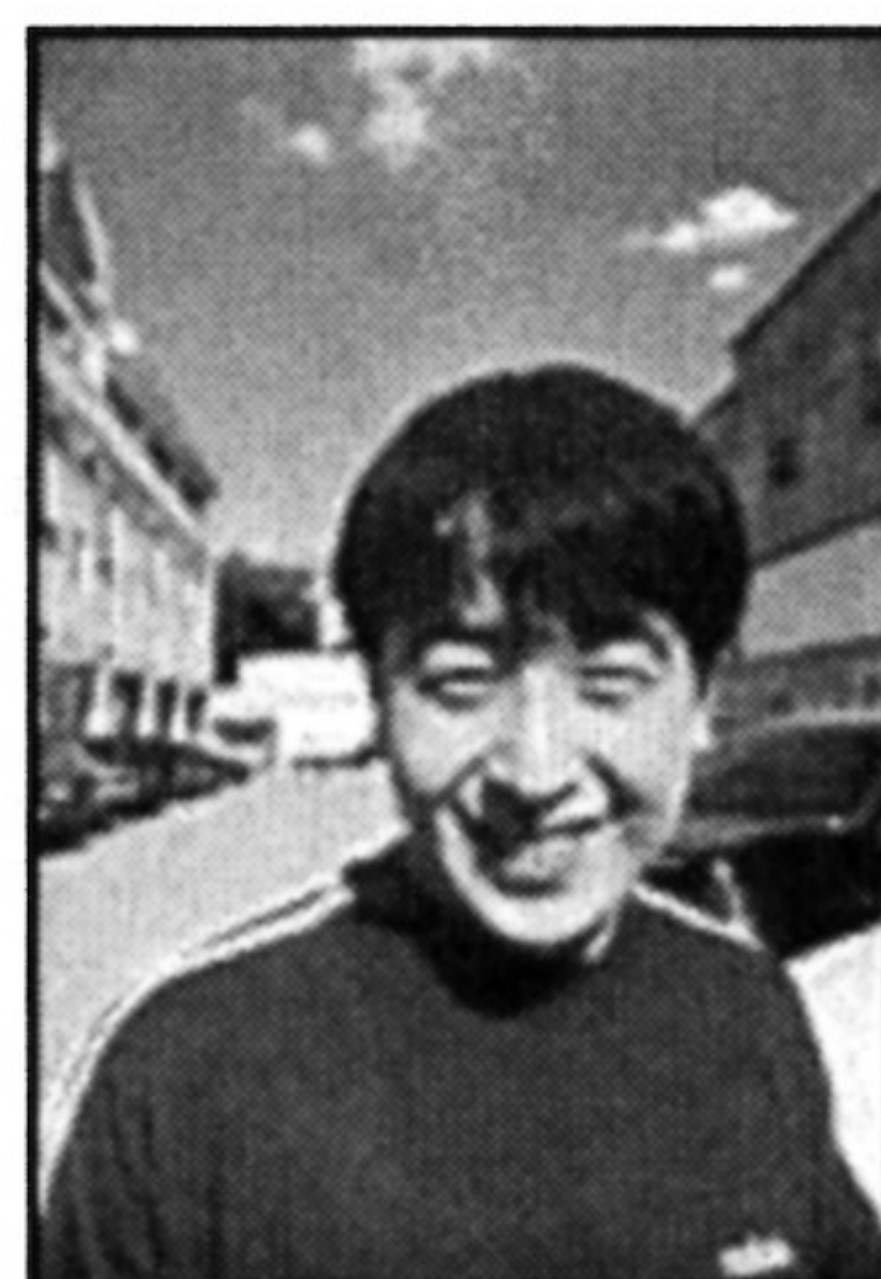
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## Jia Zhangke: Pickpocket Director

In the first scene of Jia Zhangke's award-winning underground film, the central character Xiao Wu ('Little Wu') boards a bus for his hometown of Fenyang and avoids paying the fare by claiming he is a cop. Xiao Wu's rude and smugly threatening demeanor makes him a convincing Chinese police officer and the witless ticket collector-only slightly dimmer than the pickpocket himself-buys the ruse. Jia's cinema-verité camera takes us to the front of the bus for a peek at an antique Mao medallion hanging from the rear-view mirror, then returns us to Xiao Wu's seat where he is quietly executing a hostile take-over of the wallet in the coat of the hapless passenger next to him.



Xiao Wu is a good-for-nothing drain on society. He oozes malaise. This monosyllabic, cheap-suit-wearing, chain-smoking, ill-postured loiterer is perhaps the most hopeless loser ever to darken a movie screen. You can hear the sucking sound produced by two decades of winner-take-all greed, confusion, and despair as it whistles through his soul. His meandering gait echoes the rhythms of someone



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dragging an over-loaded, grimy handbasket to hell. Xiao Wu is so pathetic, you can almost see ducts of downtrodden pathos and meanness welling under his eyes, threatening to explode through his comically large horn-rimmed glasses.

But he somehow manages to be so irrepressibly lovable that you want to invite him in for dinner, point out the cabinets containing the expensive silverware and ask him to turn off the lights before he leaves and lock the door behind him.



Xiao Wu is a pickpocket who takes cash, but deposits victims' ID cards in mailboxes so the police can return them to the victims of his trade. He is likeably shy, irresistibly lost, a loner too proud to admit his isolation, an injured young heart in need of love-any love-but trapped by the fact that he only knows one way to survive. He is also, improbably and compellingly, a human being with his own moral compass, a decent heart, and a set of values he believes in.

Although his childhood friend Xiaoyong neglects to invite him to his wedding in the backward county seat of Fenyang in Shanxi Province, Xiao Wu still makes an effort to fulfill a childhood promise of bringing a nuptial gift of cash.

A petty thief who graduated to cigarette trafficking and managing karaoke bars, Xiaoyong has recently been designated a 'model entrepreneur,' and considers himself a legitimate businessman, unfit to have any truck with a low-life criminal like Xiao Wu. He not only refuses to accept Xiao Wu's wedding gift, but returns it, calling it dirty money.

Joan Chen Sweeps Awards  
with Directories Debut





In the midst of a citywide campaign against petty street crime, the humiliated and alienated Xiao Wu stumbles upon a tentative sort of love with Meimei, a leggy karaoke girl who is touched by his kind act of visiting her when she has the flu. (In a gesture bitterly emblematic of the zeitgeist, on her sickbed he offers her a cigarette as balm for her discomfort.) When Meimei asks him to sing her a song, the introverted thief, too bashful to sing, flips open his lighter which plays Für Elise in tinny electronic tones.

Meimei soon adopts him as her sugar daddy, inspiring Xiao Wu to lift wallets with increasing vigor to support a degraded form of happiness and even take his first baby-step into the mucky modernity of the 1990s by buying a pager-so that Meimei can keep in touch with him. In the end, crime does not pay, love does not last, and even the pager betrays him as the entire town seems to turn on the lovably pitiful thief born in the wrong place at the wrong time. Yet Xiao Wu, a wonderfully crafted anti-hero, pulls through with his values intact. His inability to welsh on a simple promise somehow renders him more redeemable than anything else in dreary Fenyang-a city at the time only six months from being torn down and rebuilt in the familiar white-tiled lavatory-style architecture so popular in post-Deng China.

#### No Budget, No Approval, No Problem

With rmb 400,000, a 16mm camera, a cast of non-professional actors, a crew working for nothing (aka 'deferred payment'), and no official approval from the Film Bureau, Xiao Wu went on to garner the 1998 Berlin Film Festival's Wolfgang Staudte Award and the San Francisco International Film Festival's \$10,000 best-film prize, and was also a featured selection at the New Directors/New Films series, jointly presented by New York's Museum of Modern Art and the Lincoln Center.





Xiao Wu, although banned from distribution in China, has also proved to be a commercial success, and is being distributed in Germany, France, Belgium, Switzerland, Japan, Korea, Australia, and Canada, with talks under way for England, Argentina and the US.

In addition to paying for itself many times over, Xiao Wu has won Jia funding for his next film from Japan's Jim Carrey-meets-Quentin Tarantino actor-director Takeshi Kitano, with rights presold to France and a post-production deal that will have Jia editing his film while munching croissants and sipping cafe au laits.

#### Independence AND Tradition

Jia Zhangke prefers not to be called an 'underground' filmmaker-"no one wants to be an underground director!"-or a 'sixth-generation' filmmaker, but rather an independent director. And he considers the fact that Xiao Wu has branded him an underground filmmaker almost incidental.

"My investment came from Hong Kong, so because Hong Kong and China are 'one country, two systems,' and my investor didn't care about the mainland market, we didn't bother with the censorship process. Also, I shot in 16mm which, according to regulations, means it's a non-commercial film, an informal work."

Indeed, no films originally shot in 16mm, rather than the industry standard 35mm, are allowed to be shown in Chinese theaters, even if the final print is transferred to 35 mm.

"But as a result, I've had some 'misunderstandings' with the Film Bureau. They didn't explicitly say they were blacklisting me," he explains. "But there was a period of 'self-criticism,'" he says, laughing at the ironic ring of the Cultural Revolution term.

In fact, the original working titles for Jia's film were inspired by Cultural Revolution rhetoric: Jin Xiaoyong's Buddy, Hu Meimei's Sugar Daddy and Liang Changyou's Son. Jia read a Cultural Revolution-era



People's Daily article criticizing the poet Ai Qing. It described him as 'Ding Ling's friend, so-and so's partner, so-and-so's buddy.'

"And it struck me that for so many years Chinese have never had their own identity. When you identified someone, you'd always put him in the context of his relationships to other people: He's so-and-so's friend, so-and-so's child. But the only thing he isn't is himself," Jia observes.

So, the young director endeavored to write a film about a character caught within these human relationships during the large-scale societal changes brought about by two decades of economic reform and opening up.

"My initial idea was to find a character who worked with his hands, someone without much connection to contemporary society, like a tailor in a small city, or a shoemaker, or a cook-an artisan supporting himself by very traditional means. I wanted to see his experience in the midst of the change China is experiencing now," Jia says.

But as with many good stories, Jia eventually found his true inspiration for his 'artisan' in prison. A middle school classmate working as a prison guard in Fenyang mentioned to Jia that another classmate had been locked up for pickpocketing. When Jia inquired whether the guards and inmates could talk, his friend related, "Sure, we often chat and play cards or chess. And this guy is really bizarre! He's always talking about philosophy, questions like what's the point of living? What will become of humanity later on?" "This really affected me," says a very animated Jia. "Here was this small-time criminal pondering big, faraway questions that, on the surface, seemed so far removed from his own life. A petty thief that has a entire world of his own. So I made up my mind to write about a thief-especially this kind of thief, because his method of stealing-pickpocketing-is relatively traditional.

"In the context of an entire society moving ahead, seeking to pursue happiness," says Jia, "Xiao Wu is someone unable to deal with the changes.

He runs into walls everywhere he turns. "But some people in these times are like fish in water." Jia sardonically smiles. "They're getting along extremely well."

Xiao Wu's former buddy Xiaoyong runs karaoke bars (featuring various degrees of sexual commerce) and traffics contraband cigarettes, but within the context of changing times, he's no longer seen as a criminal. When Xiao Wu points out the degree of criminality inherent in Xiaoyong's dealings, a lackey corrects Xiao Wu: "His



cigarette business isn't trafficking. It's called 'free trade.' And he's never exploited his bar girls. It's called 'entertainment.'"

"In this age," says Jia, "people have lots of pretexts for what they're doing; they can use a single euphemism to change the reality, and that makes it legal."

"But a pickpocket is different. He's always a pickpocket, and his actions will always be those of a pickpocket."

On another level, Xiao Wu ponders what Chinese people have lost. "In their youthful days," explains Jia, "Xiao Wu and his buddies shared a kind of code of brotherhood and respected the sanctity of a promise. These are things we've lost."

In a poignant scene, the loitering Xiao Wu snatches a peach from a passing fruit peddler, while in the background we hear the soundtrack from John Woo's *The Killer*, the classic Hong Kong action ode to honor among thieves and nostalgic longing for the good old days.

"Xiao Wu still has these," says Jia. "He's got a good side to him. He returns his victims' ID cards. He promised Xiaoyong he would give him money on his wedding day and he intends to keep this promise. He has a moral bottom line that he still believes in."

"But someone like Xiaoyong is terrifying. He's an abyss. There is no boundary to his brand of morality. One word can excuse all his moral responsibility and whitewash his crimes."

#### A Generation of Filmmakers

It's difficult to miss the unintended parallels between Jia Zhangke's pickpocket Xiao Wu and Jia Zhangke himself, as a director and bright star of the so-called 'Sixth Generation.'

In a recent magazine interview, Zhang Yimou appraised the younger generation of 'underground' filmmakers with a degree of skepticism: "There are two realities in Chinese filmmaking: First, there is the political reality-the censorship of one's work; second, the commercial reality-the requirements of the box office. A film director must conform to these two realities, even if it means compromise. After he's adapted himself to these two restrictions, he may add his own artistic characteristics and retain his individual style. I don't think you'll see any transformation of these realities for the next 30 or 50 years."

Underground filmmaking is not a long-term option for a career." "We all face different realities," objects Jia. "When Zhang Yimou talks of conforming to the political reality of our times, well, his reality is very



different from ours. With the same topic, he can get approval whereas we probably can't. He can shoot Not One Less. I wouldn't be allowed to. That's because his work is measured by a different yardstick. Due to differences in age, position, and relationships, our realities are totally different!

You can't use your reality to look at mine."

Indeed, the phenomenon of Xiao Wu-an extremely low-budget underground Chinese film making a profit and winning critical respect overseas-means that Jia Zhangke can create his own commercial and artistic reality.

"As a director, I'm very excited and stimulated by what I see around me," he says.

"China is in the midst of great change, with so many things disappearing before our eyes. I think there's a responsibility to film that, so that in the future we'll be able to see how it really was. With this kind of creative work, I can't wait. If I'm able to shoot, then I must shoot.

Afterwards, it's possible that I won't be able to have it seen here. But that's not a big problem. So, you can't show it today. Sooner or later you'll be able to show it. It's a film, after all. Films are long-term investments. "Zhang Yimou and the Fifth Generation came up together, as a group. A group has its benefits, its power, but it also erodes individual creativity and the burden of responsibility. Among the younger generation of directors, we say: This is my film. I take full responsibility for it," Jia states.

Not unlike his anti-hero Xiao Wu, one can sense Jia Zhangke's bottom line. While his next film, a story of a cultural worker's unit (a song-and-dance troupe) is indeed seeking to find compromise with the political reality of China's film industry, it appears that he will, at a deep level, remain true to his own individual reality.

Quoting a favorite two-line poem by his friend, well-known poet Xi Chuan, Jia ends our interview by reciting what could very well be the battlecry of a new, independent generation of Chinese film artists unable to welsh on their promises to themselves:

The crow solves the crow's problems

I solve mine

Wuya jie jue wuya de wenti

wo jie jue wo de wenti

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