

## Document Citation

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## TORONTO PREMIERE!

### PICKPOCKET

(XIAO WU)

Director: Jia Zhangke

China/Hong Kong 1997 108 minutes

Cast: Wang Hongwei, Hao Hongjian

It is amazing that this, one of the best fiction debuts in recent memory, is only now receiving its Toronto premiere after winning several prizes and critical accolades at international festivals. "One of the most impressive and achieved Chinese films of the nineties" (Tony Rayns, *Sight & Sound*), PICKPOCKET owes more than its English title to Robert Bresson. The portrait of two-bit petty criminal Xiao Wu, a cool, calculating pickpocket who preys on the unwary in Fenyang (Jia's hometown), the film brilliantly employs everything from gritty naturalism to Bressonian precision to reveal aspects of its anti-hero as he moves through the dusty streets, karaoke bars, bathhouses, and construction sites of his backwater town. The combination of profound empathy and observational objectivity with which Jia treats the pickpocket extends to other characters: the childhood friend who leaves behind his life of crime and becomes a "model entrepreneur," dropping his old pal in the process; the wily karaoke hostess Mei-Mei; the pickpocket's peasant parents who live in the next village. (The seeming freedom of the script belies a strict tripartite structure exploring how commodification has changed three kinds of relationships – friendship, love, and family – in the new China.) Laid bare emotionally, morally, physically by Jia's probing methods, Xiao Wu comes to represent the drift and desertion of a rural class, a subject Jia would return to again and again. PICKPOCKET not only announced the emergence of a major director, but also marked a key moment in the evolution of Chinese cinema. "Even Zhang Yimou, notoriously stingy with praise for other Chinese directors, has acclaimed it" (Tony Rayns).

**Tuesday, March 22 8:15 p.m.**