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The World (Shijie)



China's headlong rush to modernise continues to throw up endless problems and contradictions, not least the awkward gap between the country's wishful image of itself as a sophisticated 'developed nation' and the widespread desire among Chinese people to travel abroad or, preferably, emigrate. Jia Zhangke addresses that gap head on in his first non-underground feature, set in and around a 'World' theme park which contains scale replicas of the Eiffel Tower, the pyramids, Tower Bridge, the Taj Mahal and so on. Tao (Zhao Tao, now established as Jia's constant muse) is a singer and dancer in the park's shows; her boyfriend Taisheng is one of the security guards. Their more or less chaste romance, ultimately strained by his attempted infidelity, gives the movie its core. Around them are assorted go-getters, gangsters, social climbers and sleazeballs (director Wang Xiaoshuai contributes a fine cameo as a lecherous businessman in a karaoke lounge), all of them as emblematic of 'New China' as the villagers who flock to Beijing to earn big money doing dangerous jobs in the construction industry. As a snapshot of China at a particular moment, this is in sharp focus. As a movie, it's highly original and brilliantly achieved.

Tony Rayns

Country France-China
Year of Production 2004
Running Time 130 minutes

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