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- [Still Life](#)
- [Dong](#)
- [Xiao Wu](#)
- [Xiao Shan Going Home](#)
- [Useless](#)
- [Unknown Pleasures](#)
- [The World](#)
- [Platform](#)
- [Still Life](#)



Unknown Pleasures: The Films of Jia Zhangke

Thursday, September 18, 2008

8:20 p.m. [Xiao Wu](#)

Jia Zhangke (China/Hong Kong, 1997)

(a.k.a. *Pickpocket*). Fresh from the Beijing Film Academy in 1997, Jia turned to the dirt streets of his hometown Fenyang for his feature debut, a Bresson-in-the-boondocks portrait of China in economic transition and

those who can only watch as they're left behind. More inclined toward a slow stroll sideways than a great leap forward, the small-time, undermotivated pickpocket Xiao Wu (Wang Hongwei) isn't keeping up as even dirt-poor Fenyang starts striving for economic success. Ramshackle shops are being demolished for modern structures; the city's cracking down on street criminals like himself; the local bar girl seems unattainable, and even his old prison buddy has become a "model entrepreneur" (defined, evidently, as selling bootleg cigarettes in large volume, and/or pimping women). An eye-on-the-ground paean to the unambitious and the non-ruthless, to sparrows in a new world of hawks, *Xiao Wu* launched not only Jia's career but also a new wave of Chinese film.

—Jason Sanders

- Written by Jia. Photographed by Yu Likwai. With Wang Hongwei, Hao Hongjian, Zu Baitao. (105 mins, In Mandarin with English subtitles, Color, 35mm, From Celluloid Dreams)

