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1 Prelude: Trying to Get Back Home

Jia Zhangke's personal hometown – and the cinematic hometown of his first two feature-length films – is Fenyang, a small city on the westerly side of central Shanxi province. Known for its production of local spirits and famous for the several legendary generals that hailed from Fenyang, the area is also surrounded by coalmines, which are a major part of the local economy. Jia was born in this small county town in May 1970; his father was a Chinese-language teacher and his mother was a sales clerk. He had a somewhat rebellious childhood in Fenyang where he performed poorly in school and befriended a group of hoodlums that became his 'sworn brothers'. The sweeping economic reforms that transformed China's urban centres in the 1980s may not have had as an immediate and visible impact on smaller cities like Fenyang, but even there the effects gradually trickled down. By the age of twenty, Jia Zhangke was yearning for an opportunity to see the outside world and went to the provincial seat of Taiyuan some 108 kilometres away. In Taiyuan Jia studied art at Shanxi University; however, as the director later recounted, it was not necessarily his artistic ideals that originally drove him:

If I ever wanted to live in another city there were only two options, joining the army or getting into college. Joining the army would have been an impossibility for me, which left college as the only option. But because my grades in school were so poor, I went to study painting since the academic requirements at the art institute were relatively lax – all the kids who flocked to college to major in art were thinking the same thing. At that time we didn't have dreams or ideals, all we wanted was to survive.⁵

It was during his time as an art student at Shanxi University that Jia Zhangke first discovered the power of cinema when he

happened to wander into a theatre screening a print of *Yellow Earth* (*Huang tudi*) (1984), Chen Kaige's influential film about a communist soldier who travels to a remote village in Shaanxi to collect local folk songs. The setting of the film, which bore similarities to the world in which Jia grew up, instantly struck him, as did the film's powerful visual style. As Jia would later recall, '[At the time,] I didn't have the slightest notion who Chen Kaige was or what *Yellow Earth* was about. But that film changed my life. It was at that moment, after watching *Yellow Earth*, that I decided I wanted to become a director and my passion for film was born.'⁶ That cinematic epiphany led Jia to apply to film school and in 1993, at the age of twenty-three, Jia was admitted to the prestigious Beijing Film Academy. Jia applied to the literature department (which was essentially a film-theory emphasis) in order to avoid the fierce competition to be admitted to the film-directing major. But the aspiring director quickly created his own opportunities to gain experience behind the camera. It was during his sophomore year in Beijing that Jia, along with a group of his classmates, formed a film club in order to produce their own student films. Inspired by the first wave of independent Chinese film-makers like Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai and Wu Wenguang who had emerged just a few years earlier, the Practical Film Group worked together on the production of several short student film projects. It wasn't long before Jia directed his first short with the group, *One Day in Beijing* (*You yi tian, zai Beijing*) (1994), a video portrait of tourists in Tiananmen Square shot on Betacam. As an outsider, then in Beijing for only one year, the short can be seen as Jia's opportunity to reflect on the pilgrimage so many Chinese from the provinces make to the physical and political heart of China, Tiananmen Square in Beijing. Jia's camera captures a curious melding of the most mundane of activities carried out at a site forever linked with the epic.

The following year Jia directed a much more substantial short that would mark the formation of his signature aesthetic style as well as many of the central themes he would continue to explore in his



Wang Hongwei as
Xiao Shan in *Xiao Shan
Going Home*

early feature-length films. *Xiao Shan Going Home* (*Xiao Shan hui jia*) (1995) traces a few days in the life of a migrant worker in Beijing. As the Chinese New Year draws near, Xiao Shan, an out-of-work restaurant cook, decides to return home to visit his family for the holiday. The entire fifty-eight-minute film traces Xiao Shan's journey – not as he returns home – but as he traverses Beijing calling on a variety of characters including a university student, a ticket scalper and a prostitute in hopes of finding someone to accompany him back to his hometown.

In the end, however, all of Xiao Shan's hometown friends have elected to stay in Beijing for the holiday and he fails to find a travel companion to accompany him back to Henan. Xiao Shan abandons his trip and the film concludes with the symbolic gesture of Xiao Shan having his long hair cut.

The unavailability and disinterest expressed by Xiao Shan's old friends at the prospect of returning home points to a new social order. Most of Xiao Shan's friends stay behind in order to work and earn extra money over the holiday, signalling a shift from traditional family values to new economic values. In this new social order, the lunar New Year – traditionally the most important Chinese holiday where families celebrate together while businesses and commercial life shut down – has been sacrificed to fuel China's economic engine.

The loss of this traditional hometown return and family reunion takes on an even more ironic tone by positioning Anyang as the site of Xiao Shan's hometown. Anyang, which lies in northern Henan province, is not a typical small town, but generally regarded as one of the cradles of early Chinese civilisation. Home to numerous archaeological sites dating as far back as to the Stone Age when the area around the city was occupied by cave people, Anyang was also the site of the first capital city in Chinese history during the Shang dynasty (1766–1050 BC). Anyang's rich history thus positions the city not just as Xiao Shan's hometown, but the ontological hometown of the Chinese people. When Xiao Shan and his friends each decide to forgo their trip home, Jia is presenting a powerful critique about what is lost along the marathon route to modernisation.

In the absence of a physical return to the hometown of Anyang – or Fenyang – lies a deep psychological nostalgia and it is this unrequited yearning that is the true subject of Jia's film. *Xiao Shan Going Home* is not about *going* home, but, rather, *longing* for home. It is precisely this common longing that brings Xiao Shan together with such a disparate array of characters from different walks of life, social classes and professions; binding them together is their common spoken dialect, local culture, hometown memories and collective exile. This was also a subject intimately close to Jia Zhangke, who himself had seldom returned to his own hometown of Fenyang since arriving in Beijing. But Jia would make his cinematic return to his home province of Shanxi where he would shoot his first three feature-length productions – *Xiao Wu*, *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures* – which together are the focus of this study. The three films form a trilogy not in the sense of any true narrative continuity between the stories or characters, but rather in terms of their shared aesthetic vision, social critique and, certainly, the common socio-geographic-historic terrain through which they traverse.⁷

On several levels, Jia's trilogy challenges the notion of the 'hometown' or *guxiang* as it has been represented over the long

course of China's history. In early Chinese literature, the hometown was often the object of longing, written about by scholars, poets and literati while fulfilling court duties far away from home, in exile, or in retreat from the affairs of the world. For these individuals the hometown became an idyllic, often idealised, site upon which to project one's hopes and nostalgia. Perhaps the most famous example is the Tang poet Li Bai's short poem, 'Quiet Night' ('Jing ye', also 'Jing ye si').

The moon shines brightly on the floor before my bed
It appears like frost coating the floor
I raise my head to gaze at the moon
I lower my head and think of my old home.

The poem is not only regarded as one of the masterpieces of Chinese poetry, it is also the first poem most Chinese children learn in school. This presentation of the hometown as an idealised site one dreams of on moonlit nights is thus one that remains indelibly etched on the Chinese psyche. In the modern era as China found itself caught in a century of turmoil and transformation, the concept of an imagined hometown where everything remained untouched by the calamities outside would continue as a source of consolation for many. In 1921, Lu Xun, the father of modern Chinese fiction published one of his most celebrated short stories, 'My Old Home' ('Guxiang'). In the story, the narrator returns to his hometown after twenty years only to be struck by a visceral disconnect between the idealised memories of his childhood there and the depressing reality of his home's current state. And though the *guxiang* was already beginning to transform, from Li Bai to Lu Xun, literary imaginations of the hometown have almost always been framed with a melancholic longing and projected from a site far removed.

Numerous critics have all emphasised the central place of the 'native home' or 'hometown' in Jia's films. Jonathan Rosenbaum has noted, 'the fact that he hails from the small town of Fenyang in

northern China's Shanxi province clearly plays an important role in all his features to date', and Kevin Lee has written, 'By looking at Jia's films, all set in Shanxi, one perceives that his rural upbringing has had a profound effect on his aesthetic.'⁸ But in many ways, Jia offers a very different approach to the hometown than has been imagined in earlier literary and cinematic texts. Set primarily in Shanxi, the spatial distance that framed earlier visions of the *guxiang* (including Jia's own *Xiao Shan Going Home*) is largely removed, as are the nostalgic yearnings that often accompany that distance. And unlike Lu Xun's story where time and the distortion of memory has gradually rendered the hometown a strange, unrecognisable place, in Jia's work we see the hometown eroding before our very eyes. What we witness is an *implosion* of the hometown as relationships, moral codes, ways of life and even physical structures are disassembled and destabilised before the protagonists can even comprehend the changes, let alone regain their bearings. With the deterioration of old communist ideals and the onslaught of global capitalism, the hometown of Jia's trilogy is in a state of constant flux. As Li Tuo has noted, although the representations of hometown life in his films appear 'stable, on one level you could even say it exists in a state of stagnation. At the same time it is in the process of being destroyed and shattered amid the process of modernization. However . . . Jia Zhangke has discovered a certain poeticism amid this stagnation and destruction.'⁹

More so than any other film-maker of his generation, Jia has cinematically embraced his hometown, repeatedly returning there to breathe new cinematic life into his ever-expanding cinematic canvas. Jia's trilogy forgoes a vision of the hometown as the idyllic countryside (or later conceptions of the hometown as the Olympian metropolis) in favour of Fenyang – small-town China. Breaking the dichotomy between the city and the country, setting his films in Shanxi, located on the cusp of the urban and rural, effectively creates a new vision of where the 'hometown' lies. In this sense, Fenyang and the other sites of Jia's films can be seen as a conscious attempt to

remap small-town China as the true heart of the country. The hometown is not just home to the protagonists; on one level, it serves as the ontological hometown of all of China.¹⁰ Like Yoknapatawpha County in the fiction of Faulkner or Northeast Gaomi County in the novels of Mo Yan, through Jia's films – and sometimes the films of his collaborators Yu Lik Wai and Han Jie – Fenyang county (or more broadly Shanxi province) has emerged a key site for imagining representing and reimagining small-town China and the Chinese 'everyman'. Continually returning to the same small-town location to build up an entire corpus of works is a feat seldom attempted in the history of cinema. With cities, of course, it is much more common; think Almodóvar's Madrid, Fellini's Rome, or Edward Yang's Taipei, but Jia's experiment is much more bold in the sense that he has taken an essentially unknown backwater like Fenyang and transformed it into a site emblematic of all of China.¹¹

Further uniting Jia Zhangke's first three features is also their common independent spirit and status as 'underground' films, which denied them theatrical release in China. (Jia's underground status would change for his fourth feature, *The World [Shijie]* [2004], which was produced by the Shanghai Film Studio and was the director's first film to be commercially released in China.) The trilogy also highlights Jia's collaborative relationship with a key group of film-makers, including cinematographer Yu Lik Wai, producer Li Kit-Ming, producer/editor Chow Keung and actors such as Wang Hongwei and Zhao Tao. At the same time, each film presents an important stage in the evolution of Jia Zhangke's cinematic development, as evidenced even by the chosen form – 16mm (*Xiao Wu*), 35mm (*Platform*) and Digital (*Unknown Pleasures*) – as well as an increasingly transnational production model, which took Jia from Beijing (*Xiao Wu*) to Hong Kong (*Platform*) and, ultimately, to France (*Unknown Pleasures*) for development, processing and post-production.

Throughout his career, Jia has positioned himself as uncompromisingly independent. This identity can be seen



throughout Jia Zhangke's corpus of cinematic work that eschews commercial modes of film-making for a fiercely independent vision that includes non-professional actors, extended takes, unconventional narrative structures and even extended film run times. Jia has reflected on his often precarious status as an independent film-maker in his actual work. This was the case in 2001 when Jia directed *La condition canine* (*Gou de zhuangtai*), a short five-minute film documenting a group of puppies being sold at a market in China.

The film portrayed a group of dogs tied up together in a burlap sack as the slowly panning camera patiently follows the movements of the squirming animals inside. Gradually, a single dog manages to wedge its snout through a tiny hole in the bag and, pushing its nose further, the puppy is able to squeeze its entire head through the hole and gasp for air. Jia used the short film to comment on the suffocating nature of independent cinema in China and provide a powerful statement about just how difficult it is for artists to breath when working within a system that censors, restricts creativity and lacks the infrastructure to support independent arts. This extremely self-conscious positioning of himself as an 'independent artist', or perhaps even 'endangered species', is displayed not only through

Jia's allegorical cinematic gestures, such as *La condition canine*, but also more blatantly through public discourse.

This independent sensibility is also evidenced by a strong tension between Jia's oeuvre and the cinematic spirit represented by the Fifth Generation, the first post-Cultural Revolution class of film-makers to graduate from the Beijing Film Academy in 1982. While *Yellow Earth*, one of the early cornerstone films of the Fifth Generation still stands as one of Jia's key influences, as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou and other Fifth Generation film-makers gravitated increasingly towards big-budget fantasy epics and historical costume dramas, the strong ideological and aesthetic rift between their work and Jia's own cinematic direction became increasingly evident. Often described as a member of the 'Sixth Generation', Jia's cinematic approach eschews the temptations of melodrama, fantasy, comedy and other commercial forms in favour of a realist aesthetic that highlights the plight of the everyman. Jia's generation of film-makers also began to turn away from the literary sources upon which so many of the Fifth Generation directors had established their careers – *Red Sorghum* (*Hong gaoliang*) (1987), *Ju Dou* (1990), *Farewell My Concubine* (*Bawang bieji*) (1993), *To Live* (*Huo zhe*) (1994) and most of the other best-known films of the Fifth Generation were adaptations from works of Chinese fiction – in favour of shooting stories inspired by real life which often reflected a highly personal dimension (although in the section on *Xiao Wu* I argue that the Sixth Generation break with revolutionary literary sources may not be as thorough as one might assume).

Critics Wang Hui and Jason McGrath have both astutely identified two primary aesthetic models that inform Jia's work, the post-1990s post-socialist realism movement in Chinese film (especially documentaries) and international art cinema (with special emphasis on the work of Hou Hsiao-hsien and Ozu Yasujiro).¹² It would be these influences combined with the experience of growing up in the new media age of the reform era, as well as a resilient attachment to his native home that would help shape Jia's unique

cinematic world. As the Fifth Generation gravitated towards the ‘Hollywood blockbuster’ model in the 2000s, the tension between their glossy ‘made-for-metropolex’ imagined past and Jia Zhangke’s gritty vision of contemporary reality became increasingly clear. This tension transformed into antagonism in 2006 when Jia decided to release his award-winning art film *Still Life* (*Sanxia haoren*) (2006) the same day as Zhang Yimou’s pan-Chinese martial arts extravaganza *Curse of the Golden Flower* (*Mancheng jindai huangjinjia*) (2006). Jia added fuel to the fire by launching a series of public attacks on the veteran director’s artistic failure in the face of commercial temptation.¹³ Such engagement is another means of Jia further positioning himself as the ‘puppy breaking out of the canvas sack’. One, however, cannot overlook the blatant ways in which engaging in such a public criticism and choosing to release his film the same day as *Curse* is also fuelled by its own set of commercial desires. And while Jia has been remarkably loyal to his artistic ideals, even after going above-ground to make films in concert with state-approved studios, even he is not immune from the temptations of commercialism, a fact best evidenced by a 2007 short film he directed for the Ford Motor Company along with other television commercials he helmed for such companies as Olay.

Produced between 1997 and 2002, Jia’s ‘Hometown Trilogy’ represents the first phase of Jia’s career as a truly ‘underground filmmaker’. The trilogy is set in the director’s home province of Shanxi and each instalment highlights the plight of marginalised individuals – singers, dancers, pickpockets, prostitutes and drifters – as they struggle to navigate through the radically transforming terrain of contemporary China. *Xiao Wu* is the story of a small-time pickpocket who faces the breakdown of his relationships with his friends, family and girlfriend amid a local crackdown on crime, which *Xiao Wu* ultimately falls victim to. *Platform*, often considered Jia’s most ambitious film, is an epic narrative that bears witness to China’s roaring 1980s and the radical transformation from socialism to capitalism. Spanning ten years in the life of a Shanxi-based song

and dance troupe, *Platform* offers a sophisticated and penetrating cinematic poem about time, change and coming of age. Because of its important place in modern Chinese cinema, the longest and most detailed section in this current book is also devoted to *Platform*. Jia's third feature, *Unknown Pleasures*, continued his meditation on China in transformation. Set in Datong, a grey provincial city caught amid mass demolition and construction, *Unknown Pleasures* traces the story of two delinquent teenagers who live on a diet of saccharine Chinese pop music, karaoke, *Pulp Fiction* and Coca-Cola while entertaining pipe dreams of joining the army and becoming small-time gangsters. Shot entirely with the new cinematic medium of digital video, *Unknown Pleasures* also marked a major step in the development of digital film-making in China.

In the 1990s, as unprecedented waves of migrant workers flocked China's urban centres from the countryside, Xiao Shan and countless others like him abandoned their hometowns to pursue new dreams in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and elsewhere. But what was the fate of all those small towns left behind for the big cities? Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy' is an attempt to reexamine the transformation and fate of those places and people – and his own attempt to finally return home. At the heart of this book lies an exploration into the historical contexts of his films, the literary and cinematic intertexts with which they form dialogue, the thematic and philosophical hubs around which his filmic universe revolves, and the visual language that makes Jia's work so strikingly unique. Each chapter is composed of close readings of crucial moments in each of the three films, through which I highlight Jia's use of editing, cinematic language and *mise en scène*, while, at the same time, teasing out the central narrative themes of destruction and change, stagnation and movement, political culture versus popular culture, and, of course, the ceaseless search for home.