

Chinese filmmaker sees a 'World' of change

Yenni Kwok in Hong Kong



Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke likes to point out that all is not well in the new China.

"The economic reforms have brought good effects. We surely have more material wealth," he says. "But I think we have lost something emotionally."

Jia is a quiet fellow who normally delivers his criticisms through his creative works. Arguably one of China's most astute directors, he has won praise for his depictions of the bitter reality of China's economic and social changes. His works are a mixture of biting tragedy and laconic wit, showing the ensuing emotional void suffered by the young generation.

The 35-year-old maverick director digs deeper into this theme in his latest film, *The World*, which opens Friday in Boston. It's his fourth and most extravagant feature yet, portraying troubled love and desperate ambitions of young people working in a world theme park, the Chinese version of Epcot

Center.

The World was inspired by Jia's visits to the World Park in Beijing and Window of the World, a similar park in Shenzhen, a southern industrial boomtown bordering Hong Kong.

The popularity of such theme parks, which showcase the world's architectural wonders from the Eiffel Tower and the Tower of Pisa to New York's skyscrapers, convinced him that in China, the superficial notion of modernity coexists with some harsh realities.

"The theme parks intend to satisfy people's longing to see the world and their interest in becoming a part of global culture," Jia says during an interview at this year's Hong Kong International Film Festival. "But, of course, it is not real. Many people may be able to go to a theme park and see 'the world,' but an overseas trip is simply a dream."

Based in Beijing, Jia was born in 1970 in Fenyang, a small town in the backwater northern province of Shanxi. He has memories of the hardship of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), after his parents – his father was a schoolteacher and his mother a shop assistant – were sent to this rural area because his grandfather worked as a surgeon in Europe. "It was a very difficult time for us," he recalls. "We did not have enough food and were often hungry."

After leader Deng Xiaoping launched the economic reforms in 1979, Jia witnessed how material needs were fulfilled, but the economic gap was widened. He believes his experience through these two periods made him perceptive to and critical of the changing social situation.

After dabbling in painting and fiction writing, Jia left his home province in 1993 to attend the Beijing Film Academy. He is still living in the capital, but he keeps returning to Shanxi for creative inspiration.

Jia filmed *Xiao Wu*, also known as *Pickpocket* (1997) when he was only 27. It's the tale of a hapless pickpocket in Fenyang. *Platform* (2000) charts the fate of a song-and-dance troupe in the 1980s as the members cope with the political and economic changes that were then sweeping through China. (Jia was a member of such a troupe in his adolescent years.) *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) follows the disaffected, unemployed slackers in the dilapidated

Shanxi town of Datong.

The World is the first film that Jia shot and set outside his home province, but it still retains the director's geographic roots. The main characters are young migrants from Shanxi, who like those portrayed in his first three movies are also lost in the dizzying rush toward globalization.

An admirer of the work of directors Federico Fellini, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Yasujiro Ozu, Jia admits that his sympathy goes to those who have fallen to the margins. "China has undergone profound economic changes," he says. "These rapid changes have affected many people's lives, and the people portrayed in my films are the ones who have to pay the bill."

Jia has sleepy eyes and a gentle, thoughtful way of talking, yet he's famed for his indie bravado and guerilla-style filming. Lacking the necessary permits, each of his first three films was shot in under three weeks, sometimes while playing cat-and-mouse games with the authorities. When casting the films, he relied on friends and amateur actors -- the lead of *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*, Wang Hongwei, was his film school classmate; his latest muse, Zhao Tao, studied dance at Shanxi University before she got a part in *Platform* and has been working with him since.

Asked how he could cast a village full of actors in *Platform*, Jia answers with a slight smile, "I cast my relatives and their friends, even those of my grandma."

Because they were shot without permits, his early films can't be released in China, and so are seen only through pirated copies and limited screenings in bars or cafes.

His work outside the system has undoubtedly boosted his standing overseas -- his films have attracted considerable attention outside China, including a nomination for the Palm d'Or prize at Cannes for *Unknown Pleasures* -- yet he has no regrets bidding goodbye to his underground status: "The World" is his first movie shot with the government's approval and screened in Chinese cinemas.

"This is a new beginning for me," he says proudly. "People in China could see my film in real cinemas."

Jia explains that he decided to work with the system after Beijing relaxed its censorship policies. Instead of having to submit a full script before shooting a film, now directors only need to submit a plot summary.

"As the policies got relaxed and we are not so restricted, I am willing to play by the rules," the director says. "Neither I nor my creative process has changed. One main difference is my film is reaching a broader audience, the Chinese moviegoers."

Yet some fans are worried that as Jia becomes a more accepted figure in China -- he chaired a jury panel at the Shanghai International Film Festival this year -- the onetime leading underground figure may have sold out.

James Quandt, senior programmer at the Cinematheque Ontario, disagrees. "*The World* offers Jia's most devastating critique yet of China's rush to erect a shining facsimile of civilization over the broken hopes of a generation," says Quandt, who recently organized a retrospective of Jia's works in Toronto.

The young director shows no signs of slowing down. He is currently finishing a documentary *Still Life*, a documentary about the jobless poor in the provinces of Shanxi, Sichuan, and Inner Mongolia. This winter, he will start shooting his adaptation of Su Tong's novel, *The Age of Tattoo*, a love story set in the Cultural Revolution. In 2007, he plans to make a feature about the revolutionaries in 1920s Shanghai, and hopes to convince French actress Juliette Binoche to star in the film.

Ambitious? Sure. But perhaps it is worthwhile to aim so high, especially for a filmmaker whose works are considered to be out of this world.

The interview was published in the Boston Globe (www.boston.com), 31 August 2005.

Note: When Jia was interviewed, he planned Still Life to be a documentary about the poor in China's hinterland provinces. His producer, Chow Keung, later told me that it was changing tremendously, and indeed Still Life, which won the Golden Lion Award at the Venice Film Festival in 2006, was very much different from the film he described a year earlier.