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CHINA UNRAVELED: VIOLENCE, SIN, AND ART IN JIA ZHANGKE'S *A TOUCH OF SIN*

Jiwei Xiao

Increasingly ubiquitous, technologized, and spectacularized, violence in contemporary mainstream cinema fascinates audiences worldwide. Key to this collective attraction is the factor of fantasy: audiences particularly enjoy watching filmic violence in Hollywood blockbusters set in fictive universes without any real-world referents. Occasionally, however, an extraordinary film can shake such viewer complacency toward the representation of violence. In 2013, Jia Zhangke's 贾樟柯 *A Touch of Sin* (天注定) was such a film. Like Joshua Oppenheimer in *The Act of Killing* [see the dossier in *FQ* 68:2], Jia explores violence mainly from the perspective of the perpetrator and through the tension between cinematic realism and theatrical artifice. But unlike *The Act of Killing*, a documentary concerned with historical trauma, *A Touch of Sin* uses drama to draw attention to violent occurrences in China that are ongoing and looming larger every day.

A Touch of Sin is composed of four stories loosely adapted from real-life incidents of violence spanning the first decade of China's twenty-first century. The models for Jia's central characters are: Hu Wenhai, a peasant vigilante who killed fourteen villagers in 2001 in Shanxi; Zhou Kehua, a fugitive who carried out a series of armed robberies in 2012; Deng Yujiao, a pedicure worker who stabbed a harassing customer (and local government official) to death at a hotel in Hubei in 2009; and the fourteen young Foxconn employees who jumped off buildings to their deaths in 2010.¹ Despite its real-life corollaries in isolated incidents, Jia's film presents a picture of the whole fabric of Chinese society unraveling at the edges, giving the impression that violence is fated to happen more frequently as a result of profound changes brought about by Chinese modernization and urbanization. The strong sense of a "state of emergency" emanating from the film makes one wonder if *A Touch of Sin* is so unsettling be-

cause it is politically prophetic. Has the Chinese director intuited "something in the air"? Only the future will tell.

A Touch of Sin was approved by the Chinese Film Bureau in April 2013 and set to be released in November of that year. In October, however, officials "started worrying that the film might provoke social unrest" and the film was put on the shelf; there it's remained, perhaps unofficially banned, ever since.² Thus, while generating huge enthusiasm internationally after winning the best screenplay award at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, *A Touch of Sin* has languished in limbo in mainland China and currently has no hope of a theatrical release there. Perhaps it was jinxed by its fatalistic title, which means in Chinese literally and ironically, "heaven decides."

A Touch of Sin opens a new chapter in Jia's filmmaking career that is self-reflexive and formally eclectic, marked by profuse self-references as well as an attempt at aesthetic hybridization with techniques adapted from literature, theatre, painting, and other art forms, both Chinese and Western. With such stylistic changes, Jia also shifts his focus to put the whole of Chinese society on trial.

A Touch of Sin is an angry film, something that can be instantly perceived in the opening sequence where violence saturates almost every frame in a plethora of riotous colors, sounds, and sensations. Whereas the cold echoes of gunshots startle the viewer, the hot blaze of a blast is even more surprising. In Jia's earlier films *Still Life* (三峡好人, 2006) and *24 City* (二十四城记, 2008), explosions were tied as much to destruction as to construction, thereby often evoking loss and hope at the same time. Now, unequivocally chilling and menacing, explosions establish the key tone of *A Touch of Sin*: a mix of bursting rage and grim despair.

The dynamite of violence that Jia detonates here has had a long fuse. Most of his previous films conclude with discontent or despair, emotions that apparently have had a cumulative effect: disaffection cannot be repressed or tolerated after a certain point. Accordingly, the cold flintiness of Jia's hometown trilogy and the languorous rumination in his more recent elegies have largely disappeared.³ Instead of watching a

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A Touch of Sin thrusts audiences into the thick of the action.

scene slowly unfold, the audience is thrust right into the thick of the action. Jia's attention, so keenly trained on quotidian life, has now shifted to out-of-the-ordinary events and to moments already at a boiling point. A *mise-en-scène* of violence has emerged, one that is poised yet dynamic, gripped by the tension between immediate action and theatricalized abstraction.

Tellingly, Jia gives a prominent role to Zhou San'er (Wang Baoqiang), the only real criminal in the film who shoots both highway robbers and the conspicuously rich with even-handed equanimity. As much a device as a character, Zhou is a needle, with which Jia sews seemingly unrelated characters and incidents into a larger tapestry of social ills and moral "sins." Following Zhou San'er's travel routes, the four stories progress temporally around the Chinese New Year and spatially from the north to the south. Zhou's structural role is logical: a serial killer's evasion from authority depends upon fugitive mobility. Always on the run, he crosses paths with Da Hai (Jiang Wu), the killer in the first episode; Zhou is also indirectly linked with two other protagonists, Xiao Yu (Zhao Tao) and Xiao Hui (Luo Lanshan), via the character of Xiao Yu's married lover.⁴

No less significantly, in the boat scene that echoes the poetic opening sequence of Jia's 2007 *Still Life* (literally "the good man in the three gorges"), the camera tracks past Han Sanming, the "good man" in the earlier film, and holds on the face of Zhou before cutting away to the river. This change of visual focus from "the good man" to "the bad

guy," in an otherwise identical frame, presages Jia's shift of moral focus in the new film. Personifying violence, Zhou San'er both binds the stories together and, as pulled by Jia, rips apart their social "fabric" to expose the strands unspooling from it.

1. The Tiger Hunter: Violence and Spectatorship

After killing three highwaymen, Zhou San'er shows up at the scene of an accident, joining a small crowd of passersby that includes Da Hai (Jiang Wu), the lead character in the first episode. Da Hai will soon rampage through the town of Black Gold Mountain, killing the corrupt and the abusive, as well as the innocent who happen to stand in proximity to his rifle and rage; but right now, keeping his distance from the toppled tomato truck and its dead driver, he looks unfazed, even bored. Meanwhile, glancing at this wreck, Zhou San'er slows down his motorbike but continues on, passing by Da Hai. For a split second, the two men, who will never meet again in the film, are inches away from each other.

By placing two of his main characters in a group of indifferent bystanders, Jia draws attention to a spectatorial scenario that is both new and reminiscent of the ending of his breakout film *Pickpocket* (小武, 1997), where the eponymous character Xiao Wu, caught and cuffed by a policeman, is gawked at by a crowd. This time, Jia turns up the viciousness: the center of the film is not a small-time thief but a dead victim. The body of the truck driver, under the apathetic



A fleeting meeting on the road and on screen in *A Touch of Sin*.

gaze of passersby like Da Hai and Zhou San'er, becomes no different from the crushed tomatoes on the ground. Intriguingly, Da Hai himself will later succumb to the cruelty of the crowd.

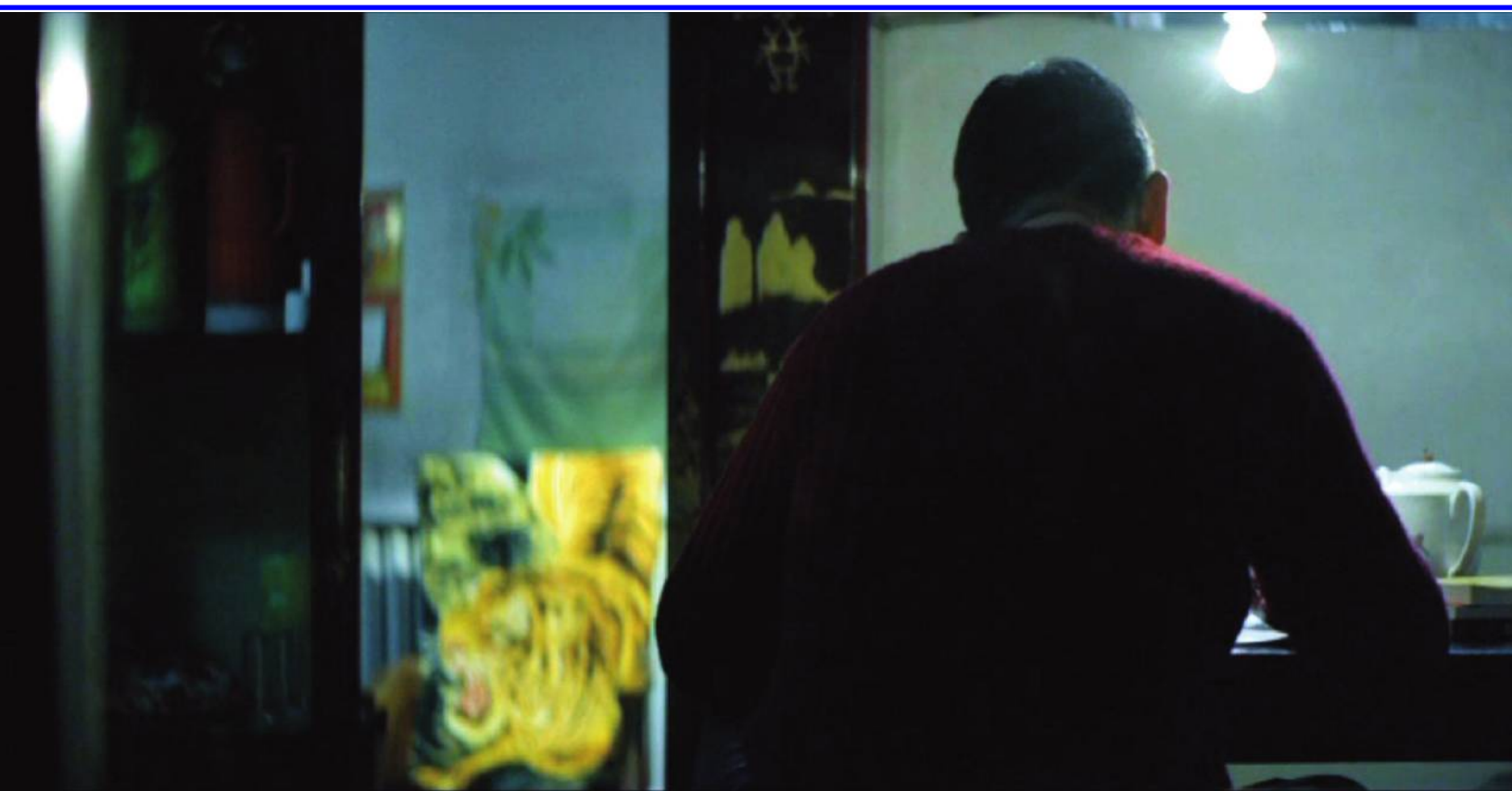
Is Jia Zhangke here paying tribute to Lu Xun 鲁迅, who produced some of the most acerbic critiques of what has come to be called “spectating Chinese style” (中国式围观)?⁵ This is likely since, when shooting *Pickpocket*, Jia was already thinking about Lu Xun’s notion of bystanders (看客).⁶ Despite the change of context, the violent outburst in *A Touch of Sin* can be viewed as Jia Zhangke’s answer to Lu Xun’s “call to arms,” a call to reject one’s position as an indifferent spectator and take action. In interviews, Jia compares his camera to his characters’ weapons.⁷ The directness and shock of violence is intended to jolt his audience into a new recognition of Chinese reality, one that in the last decade or so has been reshaped by dizzying economic growth as well as rampant corruption, astounding greed, and an abysmal gap between rich and poor.

But what about Da Hai, who is literally called to arms? Is his excessive violence justified? In an Asia Society interview, Jia rejects the idea that he is condoning violence; he praises the “rebellious spirit” of his characters, comparing them to warriors in Chinese *wuxia* (martial arts) fiction.⁸ Not unaware of their lack of heroic means and chivalry, he also calls them “*canxia*” (残侠, impaired knight-errant).⁹ Despite his professed admiration for (some of) his characters, what

emerges from his film, especially in Da Hai’s story, is a more complicated scenario of an ethical dilemma, posed as a choice between passive spectatorship and excessive violence.

In Jia’s sympathetic portrait, Da Hai is gruff but dignified. A head taller than those around him, he always stands out in a crowd. His brash pestering and attack on Boss Jiao and his colluding partners for making illicit profits from the sale of the village-owned coal mine embarrass everyone. At the airport, standing amidst a group of drummers who fold up their instruments and silently walk away, Da Hai looks abandoned.¹⁰ In the ensuing “golfing” scene, he is violently beaten by Jiao’s henchman. But the last straw is his fellow villagers’ jeers; people start to call him “Mr. Golf” after he comes back to the village from the hospital. Trailing him at first, the camera suddenly tracks forward from behind in a circling move, optically mimicking the crowd whose stares and mockery turn the man into a public spectacle. A spectator himself at the beginning, Da Hai becomes a victim of a more callous spectatorship.

Da Hai resorts to violence because the avenue to present his grievances to authorities is blocked and he is ostracized by a community tired of his stubborn pursuit of the case, but there are hints of other, more personal, causes: diabetes and loneliness, and a personality that makes him impetuous and abrasive as well as bold and righteous. His pathological streak becomes clear after he kills Jiao in his own Maserati: the



A tiger lurks in the corner of Da Hai's room.

smirk of satiation and derision on a blood-splattered face can only be that of a madman.

Jia Zhangke's use of tiger metaphors further illustrates the double sides of Da Hai's machismo. "Tiger" is the menace that Da Hai the hunter sets out to kill for the community.¹¹ In looks and stature, he resembles "Wu Song the Pilgrim" (行者武松), who famously beats a tiger to death with his bare hands in the Chinese vernacular classic, *The Water Margin*.¹² But the tiger is also a phantom beast lurking in the corner of Da Hai's room, the scourging demon inside him that unleashes his self-destructiveness. On an evening when he is planning his shooting spree, Da Hai takes out a hunting rifle to practice taking aim. The soft-focus camera pans from the mirror reflection of the fierce-looking man pointing the gun at himself to the tiger printed on the sofa cushion cover, an image that Jia rouses to life with a roar on the soundtrack.

At times, Jia seems unsure if Da Hai is a hero or a monster. When the protagonist walks out of his house on the fateful morning of the massacre, the music and mise-en-scène make it seem as if he were striding onto an opera stage. Yet Jia's camera is as cold and fast as Da Hai's rifle, which is unhesitatingly turned toward the innocent, including the wife of an uncooperative accountant. Just a minute earlier,

Da Hai had exchanged a familiar and friendly greeting with her at the door. Another morally ambiguous moment arises when Da Hai raises his gun one last time and kills the abusive farmer who keeps whipping his poor horse stuck in a ditch.¹³ In a previous encounter with the same horse and its owner, he had only stopped to watch them from a distance. Is Jia suggesting that only a violent intervention can end the vicious cycle of uninvolved spectatorship?

2. On the Road: Violence and Rootlessness

As Da Hai walks back to the village from the hospital, a Shanxi opera, *Nocturnal Escape* (林冲夜奔), is being performed on an open-air stage. Through the eyes of the crowd, Jia creates an ironic contrast between the heroic rebel onstage and the defeated rebel offstage. Yet this scene also suggests a subtle parallel: when the literary figure Lin Chong embarked on the road as a fugitive, it was a turning point in an ancient tale, but as referenced here, it also mirrors the desperate situation of a socially rootless person like Da Hai.

More significantly, as a metaphor, the "nocturnal escape" epitomizes a prevailing social reality that Jia discerns. Jostled by an atomized modern life, set adrift by the unraveling of



Da Hai's desperate situation reflected through the eyes of the crowd.

traditional social institutions and cultural structures, the Chinese are all on the road nowadays, reenacting that primary moment of rushing headlong into the unknown.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, two of the most powerful scenes in *A Touch of Sin* feature an anonymous crowd in a public space, with the main characters used as proxies to probe the state of this collective rootlessness: Zhou San'er walks through passengers who throng in front of the train station and Xiao Yu takes a rest amidst young workers waiting on call in the lounge of Ye-gui-ren Sauna in the wee hours. In both scenes, Jia uses music, slow motion, and contrasting rhythms to turn the most mundane and transient time and space into haunting lyrical tableaux of the "floating life" in contemporary China.

Peregrination associated with peasants' migrancy is an important subject in Jia's previous films as well as documentaries by other Chinese directors, notably Ning Ying's 宁瀛 *Train of Hope* (希望之旅, 2002) and Fan Lixin's 范立欣 *Last Train Home* (归途列车, 2009). Here in *A Touch of Sin*, all four main characters are peasants traveling between town and country; with the exception of Da Hai, they all spend more time in the city than in their rural hometowns, hinting at a theme latent in Jia's previous work: the decay of family-oriented rural society.¹⁵ Da Hai is unmoored from stabilizing relationships. Xiao Yu is from a broken family of migrant workers. An ultimatum she issues to her lover, to make a choice between her and his wife, is unwise but understandable—it is her desperate attempt to settle down and end the drift.

Compared with Da Hai and Xiao Yu's isolation, Zhou San'er has a large familial network. Yet when he bows to his mother at her birthday party, she looks at her prodigal son with cold, unseeing eyes. The frostiness of their family relationship is further revealed when Zhou's two brothers pay him a New Year's visit: the oldest brother only talks business, including minute details about the financial gain and loss at the end of the birthday party they threw for their mother. Brotherhood is reduced to a decimal-precise calculation of funds to collect and share.

Zhou is not unaware of his own sinfulness. He lights three leftover cigarettes as incense sticks to appease the ghosts of his victims, citing ill fate as the cause of their deaths. Zhou San'er probably also counts himself as a victim of the same fate. Watching his bored young neighbors play mahjong, squabble, and scuffle, he knows that anything is better than staying in this sleepy and hopeless village, which looks so remote yet is only across the river from the prosperous downtown of southwest China's biggest metropolis, Chongqing. He and many of his fellow villagers take to the road in order to escape poverty as well as boredom. While he tries to solve his problems by pursuing the thrills of fast pistols and the quick spoils of street robbery, the others blindly follow the job flow. Xiao Hui, the main character in the fourth story, resembles this larger group. If the homecoming of Zhou San'er provides a snapshot of China's rural malaise and forecasts its bleak future as the country intensifies its urbanization, Xiao Hui's story offers a sideways glimpse at



Zhou San'er and his family walk home to Chongqing.

the impact of the explosive transformation on rural families. His selfish mother's incessant demand for money is no less demoralizing and violent than the other alienating forces that drive the young man to commit suicide.

In *A Touch of Sin*, the road is therefore no longer a transit to transformation but has become a destiny in and of itself—for the migrants, the outcasts, and the entire group of the socially rootless. They may have families, yet they live in a perpetually homeless state. One might say that violence is an ultimate manifestation of homelessness. In this sense, Jia's choice of the temporal axis for the film, the lunar New Year that sets off the biggest annual mass migration on land in China, is profoundly ironic.

3. The Apple of Original Sin

Critics commenting on *The World* (世界, 2004) have noted Jia's knack for magnifying and miniaturizing things.¹⁶ In *The World*, Jia plied his magic with cell phones; in *A Touch of Sin*, it is an iPad. Jia's grasp of contemporary Chinese life and his artistry in representing it recall the techniques of such world-class masters of visual art as Johannes Vermeer. The ubiquitous maps hanging in the domestic space of the Dutch painter's work, like his forever half-open windows

and doors, evoke an imaginary provenance beyond the paintings' frames; maps were common in Vermeer's home country and other European nations during the age of exploration. Jia's cell phones and iPad serve a similar function in his film, and they belong to today's era of global capitalism.

Halfway through the fourth story, Xiao Hui, who has just started a new job as a waiter in a sex club called "The Golden Age," has sneaked off for a break in the lounge, where he is soon joined by Lian Rong, a young prostitute with a baby-doll face and bubbly voice. The two converse casually as the girl sits down on a sofa to browse headlines on an iPad. The entire lighthearted scene, serenely framed and at moments quivering with a violet-purple shimmer, offers a tonal and emotional respite from the starkness of the film. Entranced by tidings from faraway regions of their country, the two youths temporarily forget their own troubles close at hand. A small tablet conjures a larger world for them—and the audience.

An intimate and luminous scene like this is not unfamiliar to those who are versed in Jia's work; it sparkles against the overhanging gloom in *Pickpocket*, *Platform* (站台, 2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (任逍遥, 2002), *The World*, and *Still Life*. For a brief moment, a man and a woman withdraw



A lighthearted scene in a sex club.

to a small world of their own where they communicate quietly through sparse words as well as silence, sharing an intimacy that swings between sympathy and love. Such scenes, however, often dissolve as fast as daydreams: the connection is too delicate to withstand the buffeting that the two must brave on their own; their vulnerability, both social and economic, determines that all will be for naught.

Xiao Hui's disappointment in love leads to a more tragic end. After leaving the nightclub, he takes a new job at a Taiwanese-owned factory, an obvious reference to Foxconn, the contractor manufacturer that produces iPads, iPhones, and other electronic products. Not long after, besieged by debts and despairing of a life squeezed between a regimented assembly-line job and an overcrowded high-rise factory dorm, Xiao Hui jumps from the dorm's balcony.

Xiao Hui's earlier utterance of expletives (WTF) upon hearing the news of corruption cases that Lian Rong read to him from her iPad is perhaps too faint to count as a protest, but the dull thud of his body hitting the ground calls for a loud outcry. Such despair onscreen seems all the more poignant when, instead of dissipating after the film ends, it gathers more weight in reality. Xu Lizhi, an actual Foxconn worker who committed suicide in September 2014 at the age of 24, wrote poetry about the life and death he knew well: in one of his poems, he compares a fallen body to "a screw dropped to the ground" of the factory.¹⁷ The persistent, low-frequency electronic noise on the soundtrack of Xiao Hui's episode is part of the reality that drove these young men to death; it is a "distress signal" that the filmmaker sends to the world on their behalf.

Who then are the real culprits? Jia's discreet placement of an apple throughout the film teases his public to speculate on its meaning. Almost everyone in this film is in proximity to an "apple." Da Hai is ready to bite into an apple-like tomato; Zhou San'er peels an apple for his son; Xiao Yu inherits the fruit knife that her departing lover brought to peel apples on his trip but left behind at the train station; and of course,



Animal images convey suffering and salvation.

Xiao Hui works for an Apple supplier. The meaning is at once literal and symbolic: everyone partakes of the apple of sin. The allegorical meaning is tied to "Apple," the prime brand and icon that represents the triumph of global capitalism.¹⁸ Having bitten into its own "apple" of capitalism, China is now experiencing euphoria as well as the painful spasms of its new twenty-first century.

But here Jia is also dealing with the biggest contradiction of this era, one that defines life in China, the West, and the rest: the liberating power as well as the limitations of technology. On the one hand, the iPad scene speaks to the mastery of the director—a frequent Weibo user boasting over 13 million followers—confronting the new technology that democratizes access to information and actually inspired this film. On the other hand, Xiao Hui's downward spiral into despair, reveals the darker side of globalized technological production, especially its dehumanizing labor conditions and deadening effects on workers. If China's runaway capitalism is a capital sin in this film, everyone is touched by it, more or less.

4. "Do you plead guilty?": Individual Crime and Collective Sin

Despite the titular and visual resonances with *A Touch of Zen* (侠女, 1971), *A Touch of Sin* conveys a very different religious tenor than that of the acclaimed *wuxia* film by Hong Kong director King Hu 胡金銓. In contrast to King Hu's emphasis on the triumph of "Zen," the Buddhist divine power that ultimately overcomes evil forces and neutralizes violence, Jia uses elliptical images and icons of faith as visual signposts to map China's dysfunctional belief system: a Madonna painting on the delivery truck that's lost in the town center of Black Gold Mountain, the standing statue of Mao that hails from the socialist past around which the truck makes a U-turn, the two Catholic nuns who surreally stand by the road in the wake of Da Hai's mass shooting, the mass-produced Buddha statues of all sizes that are imprisoned



Visual refrains reflect evolving relationships between the individual and the crowd.

behind iron railings, unable to extend a helping hand to Xiao Yu and his Buddhist companion Lian Rong.

Both to reinforce and counter the grimness of this depiction of spiritual vacuities, Jia inserts an array of animal images to convey a sense of parallel suffering as well as hope and salvation. In some cases, the animals' progress, from victims to witnesses and then to liberated beings, forms the silver lining of the film. For example, thanks to Da Hai's violent intervention, out of the disgust at the beastly lot he shares with the abused horse, the animal is able to be rid of its driver and trot freely down the road. A cage of buffalo on a truck that Zhou San'er trails at the end of the second episode is reinvented as an unguarded herd of cattle roaming in the dark and about to disappear into the forest at the conclusion of Xiao Yu's story. In the biblical sense, these pack animals are scapegoats bearing the weight of human sins; they also bear away sins to the wild.

But Jia touches on the idea of sin aesthetically, through the pictorial and gestural, rather than anything explicitly pious. Most of his animal images are of a folkloric nature. For example, as an archetypal animal of the netherworld, the snake is often associated with *yin* (feminine elements) in Chinese folk myths. In Xiao Yu's story, snakes emit an inexplicable and slightly menacing charm as they flit across her path on a mountain highway and later coil in a pile in the show truck she darts into for safe haven. Jia's pro-feminist appropriation of the religious and the folkloric emerges when he sends Xiao Yu on a journey to symbolically stand trial and seek atonement for the sins that have been committed collectively.

As Xiao Yu walks along the ancient city wall, the film loops back to the beginning when Da Hai passes in front of the same wall. In both scenes, the walled city in extreme long shot looked like a mirage, or a phantom from the past. Also like Da Hai, Xiao Yu passes by an itinerant open-air stage on which a Shanxi opera is being performed for a standing audience. However, the final sequence shows an evolving relationship between the individual and the crowd. Xiao Yu first walks against the flow of the crowd, but then is able to

stand on higher ground, gazing at the stage and audience from afar, and finally, in the subsequent shot, joins the audience. In a scene shot from her point of view, the performance of the opera *The Trial of Su San* (玉堂春) unfolds onstage, and a magistrate strikes his gavel and shouts at Su San, the female prisoner kneeling beneath him, thrice: "Do you understand your sin?" ("你可知罪?", which in the Chinese context translates as "Do you know your crime?" or "Do you plead guilty?"). Hearing this, Xiao Yu looks stricken. She bends her head low, her eyes cast down—a meaningful posture in tune with the ambiguous meanings of the Chinese word "zui" (罪).¹⁹ Immediately afterward, a visual refrain of the previous group portrait appears—this time, without Xiao Yu's face. The magistrate's question, lingering in the air unanswered, is thus hurled at the audience both on and off screen. In the imaginary court that Jia installs in his audience, everyone stands trial along with the wronged women in the film: Su San onstage and Xiao Yu offstage.²⁰

5. A Touch of Sin as a Work of Social Protest and World Cinema

With four bludgeoning blows and many quick jabs, *A Touch of Sin* deflates the lofty ideals grandiosely promoted by the PRC government in recent years—the so-called "harmonious society" and "Chinese Dream."²¹ If something is not done to make China more economically and socially equitable, the film suggests, social harmony and a nation of power and opportunity will remain empty slogans and dreams, and worse, sporadic violent eruptions may turn into avalanches of social discontent and disruption. *A Touch of Sin's* honesty and moral urgency, aimed at a collective (self-)understanding of a serious social problem, make it a rare daring work in Chinese cinema today.

But precisely because its main plot runs so close to real-life sources, *A Touch of Sin* can be interpreted too easily as a sociological study. Read as such, it is not deemed to match up well with reality. After all, the larger story of peasant



Jia's female characters are independent yet vulnerable.

migrants is one of struggle and survival; they are not known to be particularly prone to violence. In addition, with its emphasis on socioeconomic forces as predetermining causes of violence, the film ignores such factors as personal character, human nature, or criminal psychology that can also explain violent acts. Whether condemned by social conditions or caught up in the heat and confusion of the moment, Jia's characters fall into the abyss of violence; sometime they fall when tripped up by circumstances, like the fruit knife that becomes a handy weapon in Xiao Yu's episode. Jia's contrivances create a coincidence of chance and necessity in *A Touch of Sin*, but they also make his audience nostalgic for *Still Life*, his earlier film that left so much to "chance" it kept surprising viewers till the very end.

To be fair, Jia is here consciously turning away from the minimalist subtlety, restraint, and neorealist penchant for improvisation and spontaneity that characterized his earlier work. He is keen on constructing continuity and unity both among the four episodes and, through them, among other films of his oeuvre. This is, first of all, a conscious choice by the director to counter the fragmented effects of the film's quadripartite structure. But more than any other of his films, *A Touch of Sin* inspires an intertextual reading. The settings are familiar: Da Hai's story takes place in Jia's bleak, wintry hometown province of Shanxi, which had been at the center of his earlier work. Zhou San'er and Xiao Yu traverse the Three Gorges region that *Still Life* unfolds majestically.

There are other subtle points of linkage. The title image of a full screen of bright jungle-green palm leaves, which turn out to be the gaudy graphic theme of the wallpaper in the room where Xiao Yu is savagely attacked, makes an agile leap to the fourth chapter, where Xiao Hui and his love interest Lian Rong take a stroll down a road lined with real palm trees. Green, after all, is a color that Jia favors, sometimes even deliberately amplifies, in his films.

The most significant aspect of this self-reflexive allusion is seen in the characters. Xiao Yu, for example, could well be seen as an updated version of Tao (*The World*) and Qiao Qiao (*Unknown Pleasure*); all three women, played by the same actress Zhao Tao, are feisty, independent, yet also vulnerable in a society condoning the money-augmented male libido. When Xiao Yu's abuser lashes her with a stack of cash, she keeps turning her head to glare at him. The repeated aggression and resistance echo the horse whipping act (and not only in its motion), but also recall a scene in *Unknown Pleasure*, where Qiao Qiao struggles to stand up again and again every time she is pushed back into the seat by her thuggish boyfriend, Qiao San'er. The latter, together with a few other Jia's regulars, also shows up in the new film. These copious references to his previous work move beyond the immediate world of *A Touch of Sin* into Jia's expanding cinematic cosmos; importantly, they also create a historical sense that counterbalances the present-ness of the film.



A scene reminiscent of Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964).



A scene reminiscent of Béla Tarr's *Turin Horse* (2011).

Jia invents a new expressive style to attempt strong sensory, emotional, and ethical impacts. First, rather than shooting fiction films as if they were documentaries, as he often did in the past, this time he crafts materials of documentary nature into a real “fiction.” He does so by reconfiguring the four isolated real-life incidents into stories taking place in a unified

time-space and by going right to the exact moment when violence erupts—the unknown of an incident that can only be conjured through fictional imagination and invention.

Jia also resorts to theatrical artifice to enhance expressiveness. Operatic music and set pieces are braided into the film at key moments. Each episode is presented like

a *zhezixi* (折子戏)—an opera excerpt from a longer piece featuring a dramatic highlight—and as a result, progresses with neither a real beginning nor consequential ending. While each single episode, anchored at a specific location, can stand alone as an individual piece, they work together as the linked chapters of a “novel.”

Jia compares his segmented yet unified film to stories painted on murals in old Chinese temples and traditional scroll paintings.²² Through *mise-en-scène*, especially costume and acting, he tries to craft a pictorial resemblance between his modern-day rebels and ancient folk heroes in vernacular literature and performing art.²³ The otherwise flat ensemble cast is therefore amplified by the cultural richness refracted from this resemblance. August (壮), fierce (猛), desolate (悲), and delicate (秀) by turns, the four stories also shift in aesthetic texture, tone, and atmosphere in accordance with the variegated geographic-cultural landscapes—as the film moves from the blustering and tough terrain of the north to the lush subtropical boomtowns of the south.

Jia's ambitious approach seeks to place his film on a higher cultural plateau—on a par with Chinese literary and theatrical classics, some of which he cites cogently in the film. *A Touch of Sin* is his attempt at turning topical and local materials into “recitable or adaptable classics” (可传唱翻拍的经典).²⁴ Jia's voracious cultural appetite, however, makes him more of an eclectic aesthete than a classicist. He also nods to the eminent modern Chinese playwright Wu Zuguang 吴祖光 (1917–2003) by referencing two of his works.²⁵

Jia is not just inspired by indigenous traditions. *A Touch of Sin* positions him as an international filmmaker of world cinema more prominently than ever before. The cinematic influences he has openly acknowledged are wide-ranging: King Hu's *Touch of Zen* and *Dragon Gate Inn* (a.k.a. *Dragon Inn*, 1967), Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003), and American gangster films such as *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931) and *The Public Enemy* (William A. Wellman, 1931). In addition, Takeshi Kitano and Johnnie To, both well-known for their aesthetics of violence, have a collaborative working relationship with Jia. Other influences of world cinema are more subtle. From time to time, an image, a setting, a motif, or a prop evokes an uncanny recognition: the explosion that savagely opens Welles's *A Touch of Evil* (1958), the mirror-gazing, gun-pointing gesture in Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* (1976), the steam-spewing factory pipes and chimneys in Antonioni's *Red Desert* (1964), the itinerant circus wagon in Fellini's *La Strada* (1954), the galloping horse in Béla Tarr's *Turin Horse* (2011), the abused animals in Bresson's *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966), and so on.

Seen in this context, the English subtitle that elides “crime” (*zui*) into “sin” (*zu*) is quite clever. Not only does the notion of “sin” mesh better with the Chinese idea of “fate” through shared references to a predetermined destiny, and extend the purview of the notion of violence from the legal/particular to the religious/universal, it also marks *A Touch of Sin* as a hybrid work of world cinema. True, Jia peers inward at native sources and looks outward for ethical and aesthetic common grounds. However, his cinematic worldliness has a deep indigenous vein, for his cultural-spiritual yearnings are rooted in the local and the folkloric. This dichotomy is epitomized by the structures that stand next to each other, forming a paradoxical pair in the film's coda: the imposing ancient city walls and the small open-air Shanxi opera stage. One mirage-like yet solidly real, the other rickety yet resiliently adaptive and mobile, both structures testify to Jia's vision—the possibility of art as a vehicle to connect the contemporary present with the cultural past, the local with the global—and at the same time, promise a haven and redoubt for all of those afloat in this unjust and unkind world.

Author's Note

In 2014, I presented a part of the draft of this essay at a post-screening panel on *A Touch of Sin* organized by CEAS of Yale University. I benefited a great deal from the excellent remarks given by my three fellow panelists: Dudley Andrew, Deborah Davis, and Yinxing Liu. I am especially grateful to Dudley Andrew for his insights, critical feedback, and generous support throughout, without which this essay would have been much diminished. I also thank the anonymous reader for his/her helpful comments and the editor of *Film Quarterly*, B. Ruby Rich, for her belief in this essay and her valuable suggestions for the revision.

Notes

1. With the exception of the first case, these incidents came to national prominence largely through unofficial media reports and discussions, often generated and circulated on the platform of *sina weibo*, a popular microblogging service.
2. In March 2014, a pirated version appeared on the internet and underground DVDs within China, which further damaged the prospect of the film's theatre release there. See Tony Rayns's interview with Jia, “The Old and the New,” *Sight and Sound* 24, no. 6 (June 2014): 30–34.
3. Jia's hometown trilogy comprises *Pickpocket*, *Platform*, and *Unknown Pleasure*. For his elegiac tone, see *Still Life*, 24 *City* (2008), and *I Wish I Knew* (2010).
4. Xiao Yu's lover is on the same long-distance bus that Zhou San'er rides for a while as the film transitions from the second episode to the third one. And at the beginning of the

- fourth episode, he is seen as a low-level overseer of the clothes factory where Xiao Hui first works.
5. Lu Xun (1881–1936) was considered one of the founding fathers of modern Chinese literature.
 6. See Michael Berry's interview with Jia in *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 203.
 7. The interview video is on the Asia Society's website: <http://asiasociety.org/new-york/filmmaker-jia-zhangke-confronts-everyday-violence-touch-sin>.
 8. See La Frances Hui, "Filmmaker Jia Zhangke Confronts Everyday Violence in 'A Touch of Sin,'" *Asia Society Newsletter*, September 30, 2013; for video, see above URL.
 9. For a further discussion of the *wuxia* genre and violence, see Stephen Teo, "The Aesthetics of Mythical Violence in Hong Kong Action Films," *New Cinemas: Journal of Contemporary Film* 8, no. 3 (2011): 155–67.
 10. The sequence of the welcoming ceremony conducted with the fanfare and trappings of a state arrival ceremony is Jia's mocking homage to China's official TV station CCTV, which for a long time has filled its primetime news program with staid reports about foreign dignitaries' visits to the country. It is therefore also a satire of China's nouveau riche's rather clichéd fantasy of power.
 11. The tiger can also be a metaphor referring to an oppressive [local] government, as in "苛政猛于虎" (An oppressive government is more fierce than tigers), a Confucian saying recorded in *Analects*.
 12. Jia intends Da Hai to evoke the image of another character in the novel, Lu Zhishen 鲁智深, who epitomizes both justice and brashness. But in terms of theatrical types, Da Hai resembles Wu Song more than Lu Zhishen.
 13. I think that this is the place where the intellectual cool feels amiss. When some audiences at the New York Film Festival premiere cheered Da Hai for killing the horse-whipping farmer, I realized it was because the scene appealed to their instincts for revenge and moral self-righteousness.
 14. In his interview at Asia Society, Jia said that *A Touch of Sin* was about a "nocturnal escape" for everyone (所有人的夜奔). He also alludes to this idea with the diegetic music of a high-pitched, desolate, and haunting aria from *Nocturnal Escape* (the Sichuan Opera rendition) that opens *Still Life*.
 15. Thanks to Deborah Davis for her explication of the "hollowed-out effect" in her talk, "Re-Placing the Urban: Rural Binary," Yale-NUS, March 12, 2014. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=BqfSAN_Mw_Q.
 16. For more on Jia's inversion of "the norms of scale" and the place of his work in world cinema, see Dudley Andrew, "Time Zones and Jetlag: The Flows and Phases of World Cinema," in *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ed. Natasa Durovicová and Kathleen E. Newman (New York: Routledge, 2010), 84.
 17. For more about Xu, see Wang Zhuoyi's post at Ohio State University's MCLC (Modern Chinese Literature and Culture) Resource Center website, "The Poetry and Brief Life of a Foxconn Worker," November 6, 2014, <http://u.osu.edu/mclc/2014/11/06/the-poetry-and-brief-life-of-a-foxconn-worker/>.
 18. The theme of sin fits within the context of contemporary Chinese discourse on China's capitalism. In the early 2000's, Chinese liberal economists as well as their critics often borrowed the Marxist term of capitalism's "original sin" (资本原罪) to refer to the primitive accumulation of capital by exploitation and dispossession.
 19. The Chinese character "zui 罪," when combined with other characters, can mean either "crime" (as in "fan-zui 犯罪" [commit crimes]) or "sin" (as in "原罪 yuan-zui" [original sin]).
 20. Jia's theatrical trial continues as the credits roll on the soundtrack of another Shanxi opera, *The Execution of the Judge of Hell* (铡判官).
 21. "Harmony" (和谐号) is the name of all high-speed trains in China, which appear in Xiao Yu's episode. The Golden Age sex club in the last episode is called in Chinese "盛世中华娱乐城." The use of the clichéd term "盛世" (prosperous times) in naming the club is apparently a jab at the country's inflated sense of national self.
 22. See Jia's tie-in book, 《天注定》 (*Tian zhu ding*) (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2014), especially the Tony Rayns interview with Jia from *Sight and Sound* (reprinted here in Chinese), 152.
 23. *Ibid.*, 178–83.
 24. *Ibid.*, 179.
 25. *Lin Chong's Nocturnal Escape* (林冲夜奔, 1943) and *Return on a Snowy Night* (风雪夜归人, 1942). Part of this last title, Ye-gui-ren 夜归人, shines on the neon sign at the sauna where Xiao Yu works.