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# Violence, Wuxia, Migrants: Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Discontent in A Touch of Sin

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**Violence, *wuxia*, migrants: Jia Zhangke's cinematic  
discontent in *A Touch of Sin***

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## **Abstract**

This article examines the representation of violence in Jia Zhangke's film *A Touch of Sin* (2013) in light of Žižek's theory of 'objective violence' and the *wuxia* tradition. Jia attempts to understand the rise of individual violent incidents during China's post-socialist transformations by laying out the social, historical, and political milieus in which they take place. He unveils the Žižekian objective violence hidden in the realm of social normality, pinpointing the country's sins of collusion with the global capital to impose injustice on the poor and disadvantaged. Invoking the *wuxia* genre, Jia portrays the protagonists not so much as perpetrators of violence but as *xia*, knights-errant, who demonstrate a precious spirit of rebellion that the contemporary ethos tends to lack. Focusing on often-overlooked emotional experiences, Jia offers a humanist insight into the depths of these people's despair, isolation, and humiliation. Jia thereby makes his film a poignant critique of the dominant ideology that pushes neoliberal development regardless of its human costs.

**Keywords:** violence; *wuxia*; *xia*; migrants; sin; neoliberalism; the state-capital alliance

Unlike his previous body of work, which was lauded for its placid and subtle snapshots of contemporary China, Jia Zhangke's recent film *A Touch of Sin* (2013) explodes with violence. Based on recent real-life incidents widely circulated on Weibo, the Chinese version of Twitter, the film is organized thematically and structurally around violent acts. It focuses on four characters, each living in vastly different geographical and social milieus, who are all driven to sanguinary ends. Many of Jia's followers had grown used to his constrained and meditative approach, exemplified by films like *Platform* (2000), *Still Life* (2006), and *24 City* (2008). They found themselves brutally jarred by *A Touch of Sin*'s stylistic shift. Some compare this film to

those of Quentin Tarantino, labeling it as Jia's attempt to go mainstream.<sup>1</sup> However, one must note the crucial difference between Jia's representation of violence and Tarantino's play with it: while the latter tends to fetishize the genre by showcasing stylistic sequences of carnage, Jia painstakingly sketches the socio-political circumstances in which each incident hurtles toward homicide. In doing so, Jia prompts one to ponder these questions: Why do people tend to resort to violence to resolve conflicts or dissatisfaction in the contemporary era? What does the representation of violence, as Andrew Jones (1994) inquires in a different context, tell us about the historical moment in which it was produced?

Notably, Jia Zhangke uses the hallmarks of the *wuxia* (martial arts) genre to pose these questions to the audience. The English title of the film, *A Touch of Sin*, alludes clearly to King Hu's 1971 *wuxia* masterpiece, *A Touch of Zen*. In an interview with the Asia Society, Jia (2013a) mentioned that he sees parallels between present-day violent incidents and those dramatized in *wuxia* films by Chang Cheh or King Hu. The *wuxia* genre provides him with 'the right film language' (ibid.) to effectively depict these stories. With regard to violence in the *wuxia* tradition, Sima Qian's sympathetic defense of the use of violence sets the tone for later reception of *wuxia* literature and film (Teo, 2009). For Sima Qian, when the society is in a state of lawless political chaos, people resort to violence to defend and vindicate themselves. Most films produced during the heyday of martial arts cinema in the 1960s and 1970s are set in a society plagued by abuse of power and inequality. The films of King Hu present the most representative case. Hu showed a fascination with the late Ming dynasty, a period known for its all-pervading political corruption, domestic strife, and foreign invasions. The *xia* (knights-errant) in his films rise to fight against corrupted officials on behalf of the oppressed. The vocabulary that Jia adopts from the *wuxia* genre makes violence a tool of last resort in the battle against social injustice.

Žižek's idea of 'objective violence' casts a revealing light on Jia's unique approach. In his 2008 book *Violence*, Žižek challenges readers to look beyond mere 'subjective violence,' or the violence performed by clearly identifiable agents. Instead, he sensitizes us to the anonymous, oft-invisible presence of 'objective violence,' which sustains the relations of exploitation and domination:

The catch is that subjective and objective violence cannot be perceived from the same standpoint: subjective violence is experienced as such against the background of a non-violent zero level. It is seen as a perturbation of the 'normal,' peaceful state of things. However, objective violence is precisely the violence inherent to this 'normal' state of things. Objective violence is invisible since it sustains the very zero-level standard against which we perceive something as subjectively violent. (2008, 2)

Rendered dialectically, the relation between the two types is clear. Subjective violence appears as it does precisely because we take the 'normal' state of the system for granted, failing to problematize its very foundation. For Žižek, one has to shift standpoints and interrogate this zero-level state of things, which itself entails powerful and ruthless violence. It is hence necessary to account for objective violence to "make sense of what otherwise seem to be 'irrational' explosions of subjective violence" (ibid.).

*A Touch of Sin* remotely echoes Žižek's plea, using individual acts of violence to unveil the structural violence that lurks behind ostensible normality. Many are arrested by the spectacles of bloodshed themselves, responding with their own moral judgment. Jia, by contrast, steps back to inspect the distinct circumstances under which the spectacles occur, contextualizing rather than isolating them. Continuing the central motif of his films—change, as Wang Hui (2011) has identified—Jia once again casts his eye on the socio-political, cultural, and economic transformations taking place in the post-socialist era as well as their consequences for human life. Unfolding the socio-political factors, Jia challenges viewers to discern and pinpoint the causes of these seemingly inscrutable and impetuous violent murders. In his view, individuals act violently

because they are captives of an objectively violent system.

Drawing on Žižek's schema and the *wuxia* tradition, I explore how Jia Zhangke uses violence to expose the 'sins' of mainstream ideologues and their accomplices, holding them to account for social inequality and injustice in post-socialist China. The means of this exposure are twofold. First, Jia adapts real-life incidents to debunk the neoliberal promise, laying bare the means by which state power and private capital alienate, exploit and entrap the poor, especially the rural population and migrant workers.<sup>2</sup> Second, he transforms his protagonists from mere perpetrators of violence into *xia*—knight-errant heroes. He brings to light the struggles and agonies of the socioeconomically dispossessed, restoring their humanity with a glimpse of their rich emotional world that official media representations tend to repress.

### **The country's 'sins': objective violence unveiled**

With its unsparingly graphic bloodshed, *A Touch of Sin* stands alone in Jia Zhangke's oeuvre. Although the stories in the film are based on reported cases from the recent past, they employ highly theatrical and artificial conceits. For example, the recurring scenes of performance and the symbolic presence of animals belie the tales' ripped-from-the-headlines relevance. Partaking of myth and fable, they portend considerably more than the real-life events that inspire them. Nevertheless, Jia (2013b) asserts in an interview that 'there is no metaphor in this film; there is only reality.' Tony Rayns also calls this film a 'state of the nation' report (2013: 32).<sup>3</sup> How should one make sense of Jia's concept of reality? What does he mean when he refers to it? At stake in Jia's four dramatized incidents is the Lacanian notion of the Real, acutely described by Žižek as "the inexorable 'abstract,' spectral logic that determines what goes on in social reality" (2008:13). What Jia pursues is not the apparent social reality (subjective violence) but the Real (objective violence) that undergirds it. In the process of telling individual stories of

the four protagonists, Jia peels the skin of reality and probes its kernel, where the quieter but far more savage crimes lie.

The first segment of the film follows Dahai (Jiang Wu), an ex-miner in a village in Shanxi province. In telling his story, it problematizes the widening gap between the rich and the poor. The film opens with a close-up of Dahai carelessly tossing a tomato. The camera then zooms out to show him standing astride a motorcycle beside an overturned truck, which lies on its side while its load of produce spills across the road. Ever vigilant, Dahai watches the site of the accident until the rescue team arrives. As he patiently keeps looters at bay, he establishes himself as a conscientious guardian. Both literally and symbolically, such scenes mirror changes extant in contemporary China. During the nation's expeditious march toward privatization and marketization, goods that once would have been state-owned spill out, making themselves available to those with appetite, money, and power. On a smaller scale, the mining business in Dahai's village exemplifies this process. The coalmine, once run by the community, has been cheaply transferred to Jiao Shengli, Dahai's former classmate. Though all the villagers are promised a share of the yearly dividends, they get nothing of the kind. Instead, Jiao Shengli keeps the profits for himself, leaving poor villagers in a state of grueling servitude.

An inquiry into the issue of class, familiar from early Jia's films like *Xiao Wu* (1997), recurs here. Discussing the film *Xiao Wu*, Jason McGrath notes the juxtaposition of Xiao Wu, a petty thief, and his former friend Xiaoyong, now a nouveau riche. In McGrath's words, the contrast 'forces us to contemplate the generally repressed issue of class in reform-era China' (2007: 90). Xiao Wu and Xiaoyong grow apart, gradually occupying distinct social strata. Dahai and Boss Jiao relate to each other in an analogous way: while the former lives in utter destitution, the latter lavishes huge sums on luxuries like a private jet. If *Xiao Wu* problematizes the class

distinction by questioning the ethical ground of Xiaoyong's business, which involves smuggling and prostitution (91-2), *A Touch of Sin* goes further, interrogating the covert role of the state in making this new class structure.

*A Touch of Sin* effectively dramatizes the complicity of state officials and capitalists in polarizing the rich and the poor. In the film, it is the village chief who pushes the sell-off of the village coalmine to Jiao Shengli. Rather than guarding the interest of the villagers, the chief colludes with the Shengli Corporation, allowing it to misappropriate public property. In this respect, he hardly stands alone. Indeed, he represents many government officials in today's China, who routinely offload state resources for personal profit. The village chief's conduct, moreover, is tacitly endorsed by the current national discourse of 'development,' in which the state—heedless of means or consequences—does all it can to facilitate economic growth. The ideological move toward capitalism renders political and economic power/capital reciprocal and sometimes even interchangeable.<sup>4</sup>

The scene in which Boss Jiao returns to Shanxi by private jet vividly dramatizes this interchangeability. Greeted by flowers, drums, and a crowd on the airport tarmac, Boss Jiao unambiguously resembles the head of state returning from a diplomatic visit. But the officious pomp of Boss Jiao's homecoming is possible only because public representatives have dealt illicitly with private capital. The villagers are summoned to participate in the greeting team in exchange for a bag of flour. One is left wondering how much the village chief has earned from orchestrating the entire welcoming ceremony and, by extension, his years of dishonorable service. Only the recalcitrant Dahai dares to confront this state-capitalist alliance and demand an explanation for the socioeconomic inequality that overtakes the village. Unfortunately, his query goes unattended and largely unanswered.



Together, the state and capitalists work to drown out the voices that do not harmonize with the dominant ideology. Upset by the village chief's dismissal of his questions, Dahai decides to send a petition letter to the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, a Communist Party institution charged with rooting out corruption and malfeasance among party cadres. However, there is no way for his letter to reach the bureau because its exact address is never known to him. Ironically, Dahai's voice is repressed by the very state organization designed to hear it. Worse yet, Dahai's query is met with physical violence. At the airport, in front of the whole village, Dahai challenges Boss Jiao to talk about the economic status of the village; instead of a reply, he gets a harsh beating. Here, violence is the handmaiden of capital/power, employed to silence a complainer like Dahai. The episode aptly juxtaposes Dahai's image with a pathetic horse being whipped to the point of collapse. He is not just being beaten like an animal, but he is also being muzzled like one who is banished from the symbolic realm of speech. The state and capital thus succeed in muting their opponents, compelling silence with a mixture of clerical trickery and violent threat.

The second narrative of the film evinces what Hairong Yan (2008) calls 'the emaciation of the rural.' In her research on this phenomenon, Yan observes that 'the rural is emaciated in relation to the urban telos' (2008: 39) during the process of China's economic reorientation and its re-entry into the global economy. Prioritizing urban development, the state has markedly diminished its support for the agricultural sector and the rural population that works in it. Sidelined in the nation's economic reconfiguration, the countryside has become a stagnant, lifeless wasteland. Following Zhou San (Wang Baoqiang), a roaming robber who travels back to his home village near Chongqing in the southwest, the camera surveys the decay of the rural as well as its striking contrast with the urban. Zhou San's home village looks desolate and cheerless

even during Chinese New Year, usually the most festive time on the lunar calendar. Notably, the village lies within the shadow of residential skyscrapers, which loom from the other side of the river. Such a contrast casts the village as the city's moribund Other, which is alienated from the national enterprise of economic development. Seeing little hope in the village, most people flow to the city to seek employment, a move encouraged by the state to meet its need for cheap labor. The village has thus been emptied, forcing Zhou San's family to postpone his mother's birthday party till the Spring Festival when the labor migrants, including the Zhou brothers and their relatives, return from the cities.

Zhou's home, ravaged by three decades of change, now signifies the opposite of what it signified under Mao. The countryside—once exulted as a sanctuary of enlightenment for urban youths—has become the despised antithesis of modernity. Cut off from either material success or modern subjectivity, young villagers occupy a meaningless wasteland. Thus, when Zhou's wife asks why he does not just stay in the village, Zhou simply answers, 'It is boring.' The same forces that have emaciated the village have emasculated its young men, resulting in flawed masculinity that characterizes the reform era (Lin 2005: 190). Accordingly, when young villagers gather to play mahjong and card games on Chinese New Year's Eve, a minor quarrel escalates into a bloody fight. In a fitting twist, the fight is triggered by the profane mockery of a young husband whose wife (so the gossip runs) sells her body in the city. The devalorization of the rural, as Yan acutely argues, 'is a process of violence that appropriates economic, cultural, and ideological value from the countryside, where rural youth can no longer find a path to the future' (2008: 44).

Money flows prominently through the film's narrative, rising to flood levels in the third segment. The central character of this section, Xiaoyu, works as a receptionist in a sauna and

massage parlor. Though she insists that she is not one of the ‘masseuruses,’ she is forced to prostitute herself just as they do. Infuriated by her refusal, one client repeatedly whips Xiaoyu’s head with a wad of cash, proclaiming, ‘I have money; isn’t it good enough?’ The way he wields the money bespeaks the ubiquity of commercial culture in today’s China. To a man with a handful of yuan, nothing is too sacred to be sold. Such belief also appears in the case of the holy snake goddess. With her, the businessman cannily combines sex appeal with fortunetelling, turning both into commodities that satisfy men’s psychosexual desires.

Yet, questions remain: what makes the sauna clients think that they can buy Xiaoyu even after she tells them no? How can they so casually dismiss her refusal of money? Central to their indifference to Xiaoyu’s will proves a total faith in commodity economy, and an assumption of the unqualified power of money granted by the post-socialist ideological discourse. When discussing the image of money in Jia’s *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), Michael Berry observes, “with no ideology to replace Maoism besides ‘to get rich is glorious,’ money eventually emerges as the new state ideology” (2009: 99).<sup>5</sup> In *A Touch of Sin*, money is not simply a spur to action or a means of fulfilling desire. Instead, it becomes a law unto itself. As the client beats Xiaoyu with his stack of bills, we see the rule of money stridently enforced. The enforcer nullifies Xiaoyu’s will, disables her articulation and suppresses her resistance. His abuse recalls the earlier abuses of Boss Jiao, who harnesses money to silence Dahai after he has been beaten. In Xiaoyu’s case, a patriarchal, money-centered ideology reduces women to mere commodities for economically empowered males to consume. Female subjectivity and dignity are savagely violated.

The tale of Xiaohui (Luo Lanshan) in the last chapter may be familiar to international viewers, as it evokes the widely reported employee suicides in the Shenzhen plant operated by Foxconn. News reports attribute their deaths to horrid work conditions, relentless shift schedules,

and absence of psychological counseling. But *A Touch of Sin* links them to the tantalizing false promises of economic neoliberalism that holds sway in China today. The process of China's neoliberalization heavily exploits the notion of freedom. In a society suffused with material goods, freedom comes to mean the freedom to consume whatever you desire. This freedom gives rise to a beguiling sense of empowerment. Xiaohui, a teenager from the hinterland, is one of many rural youths today, enchanted by the dazzling fantasies of consumerism. Part of the story takes place in a resplendent upscale nightclub-cum-brothel that serves rich customers. The spectacular space of the nightclub serves as a perfect specular image of the contemporary Chinese society. Dressed in a tux, equipped with a walkie-talkie, and interacting with pretty girls, Xiaohui is mesmerized enough to feel one with his surroundings. The bliss of membership in this fantastic world comes to a head when a guest from Hong Kong tips him with a hundred-dollar bill. Holding the money instantly elevates his status. The camera, however, quickly de-emphasizes Xiaohui's personal wealth by zooming in on the bill itself, obscuring the details of its ownership.

The bleak reality of his own situation eventually shatters his fantasy of belonging. This starts with a piece of news Xiaohui's love interest, Lianrong, who both performs and prostitutes in the club, reads out to him from her iPad. The pair is flabbergasted by a local bureaucrat's collection of more than a hundred Louis Vuitton bags. Today's youth are fascinated with digital devices 'to be on top of information so that they won't be left behind,' says Jia Zhangke (2013a). But the knowledge of other people's wealth plagues rather than empowering them, thereby making them feel hopelessly far behind. As Tonglin Lu incisively writes, 'the spectacle of wealth is both familiar to them, as the fruit of their work, and unreachable for them, as a *dispositif* [device] that instigates their fantasy of image consumption while forever separating them from

the objects of the instigated desires in their everyday lives' (2008: 171-2). The lack of capital alienates Xiaohui from consumer goods and disempowers him in his search for love, as Lianrong rejects his advances because of his poverty. In this mercantile context, the romantic desires of Xiaohui and his ilk are forever doomed to unfulfillment. The phoniness of the freedom they were promised thus becomes crystal clear.

Xiaohui is trapped on the margin of the consumer society. On the surface, neoliberal China gives rural youths an unprecedented degree of mobility, freeing them to compete for jobs in the city. Like millions of such youths, Xiaohui has been constantly on the move. He migrates from China's interior to the coastal south, drifting among the big cities in Guangdong province. His flexibility to travel and to change jobs one after another seemingly confirms a potential to transcend social constraints and geographical boundaries. Yet wherever he goes, he remains in the position of being exploited and alienated, unable to shed his identity as a mere migrant laborer. In Tonglin Lu's words, his is a 'trapped freedom' (2006: 123). There is simply no way for Xiaohui to escape the control exerted by the neoliberal economy. Even his family, presumably a safe haven, succumbs to the logic of capitalism. His mother's long-distance demands for money are the last straw, eventually driving him to suicide. With no money, future, hope, or love, Xiaohui is reduced to a bare laborer whose human worth derives exclusively from his production of surplus value. As Xiaohui is disabused of these fantasies, neoliberal logic implodes from within.

Together, the film's four vignettes lay bare the Žižekian objective violence dwelling furtively in the post-Mao project of modernity, as relentless marketization, urbanization, consumerism, and development define policy and national identity. In this discourse, the state sides with capital, constructing and legitimizing new social hierarchy. Economic strategy favors

the city over the countryside, turning the latter financially and symbolically into a field of death where its denizens cannot find hope. Money fills the ideological void left by Maoism and inflicts its abuses on the poor and disadvantaged. The neoliberal economy weaves a discursive web of lies and deceptions to captivate, exploit, and entrap young migrant workers.

In all these stories, Jia establishes the view that violence is not merely the hideous face of global capitalism autonomous from the power of the state. It comes, rather, from an intimate conspiracy of both. The protagonists are doubly threatened and damaged by the behemoth of the state-capital joint force, which drives them into an impasse. The film ends with Xiaoyu ominously falling into the grip of the expanded Shengli Corporation after migrating to Shangxi. The narrative thereby comes full circle, closing at where it begins and locking its desperate characters within.

### **The rise of *xia*: animal symbolism and *wuxia* legends**

The dire social-economic-political situation in which the protagonists of the four tales are caught recalls the setting of many classic *wuxia* movies. In films from this genre, social injustice prevails and the rule of law is undermined. Violence becomes the last means for the poor and the oppressed to register discontent and defend themselves. In *A Touch of Sin*, Ji Zhangke sketches similar circumstances: as the state secretly works with capitalists to normalize social inequality and exploitation in the process of China's neoliberal development, the poor and disenfranchised are left no other means but violence to wrest dignity from a system that withholds it. In portraying protagonists, Jia avoids placing them in neat categories. They are neither wholly just avengers nor wholly wronged victims. Instead, he characterizes them as *xia*, who are archetypal characters in martial arts literature and cinema. In what sense are they *xia*, especially in the contemporary era? What are the implications of promoting the perception of them as such?

Creatively invoking both the notion of *xia* and the well-known episodes from the martial arts genre, Jia forges the contemporary knights-errant from a new mold.

The four protagonists, at first blush, can hardly evoke the spirit of knight-errantry in the Chinese martial arts tradition. In his study of Chinese knights-errant, James Liu (1967) upholds that *xia* is more of a matter of temperament, referring to those men of chivalrous quality. According to him, the most prominent characteristic of *xia* is the altruism of their willingness to risk their own lives to rescue the poor and the distressed. In a similar vein, Stephen Teo identifies righteousness as ‘the motivating principle behind the knight-errant’s mission to do good deed’ (2009: 18). Chen Pingyuan supplements this moral dimension by adding the heroic spirit and flaming passion underlining the mythology of *xia* in Chinese literature (2002: 14). The protagonists in *A Touch of Sin*, however, appear to be far removed from these defining traits. There is not so much a sense of altruism as a self-defense mechanism at work when they act out; and far from consciously abiding by a righteous ideal, they exercise force largely out of gut instinct and momentary impulse. Nor do they possess the chivalrous, romantic air inherent to the notion of *xia*. Harassed and insulted, the protagonists are simply desperate people struggling for physical and mental survival.

Jia Zhangke (2014) calls them ‘can xia,’ or damaged knights-errant. Indeed, they each have personal problems and bear with them a deep wound. Dahai has diabetes, and has never fully recovered from the loss of his erstwhile girlfriend, now wife of another man living in equal poverty. Boss Jiao’s paid lackeys have further injured his body. The mental blows come from both the village chief and his peers, with the former calling him a ‘loser’ and the latter calling him a ‘golf ball,’ which suggests that he is made to be struck. Zhou San becomes increasingly alienated from his wife and son, proving his failure in the vital male roles of husband and father.

A child of separated parents, Xiaoyu has a love affair with her former boss, and is pressing him to think through their relationship and make a choice. Yet seen as a seductive whore by the boss' wife and a prostitute by the clients, Xiaoyu is humiliated, beaten, and denied any chance to cultivate a sense of dignity. Xiaohui in the last part of the story ends up disillusioned with every beautiful promise constructed by post-socialist narratives—freedom, mobility, success, and romance.

What is it that makes these damaged characters *xia*? Underneath their wounded souls is a deep-seated desire for justice, freedom, and dignity—the same ideals that traditional knights-errant sought to defend. Marginalized by the state-capital alliance in reality, these characters are pushed into the realm of the imaginary. Only there can they find the space necessary to retain their subjectivity and self-esteem. In light of this situation, Jia Zhangke ingeniously presents the *xia* aspects of them by evoking the imagery of animals and alluding to episodes from *wuxia* films and stories. He thereby constructs a virtual territory to bring out elements normally subdued in reality. Each protagonist is associated with an animal emblem, a legendary knight-errant, or both to reveal his or her chivalrous disposition.

In the first episode, Dahai is frequently juxtaposed with the image of a roaring tiger embroidered on the cover of his couch. The ferocious tiger contrasts starkly with the sickly Dahai, especially in a shot that captures the two while Dahai injects his insulin. Such an opposition dissolves later when Dahai drapes his hunting rifle with the tiger-patterned cloth and stalks through the village to pursue a vendetta. Metonymically, he unites with the spirit of the tiger, breaking free from the fate of the pathetic horse with which he was earlier identified.

Dahai's decision to act also parallels that of Lin Chong, the warrior nicknamed 'Panther Head' in the martial arts epic *The Water Margin*. Just as Lin Chong is driven by incessant



persecutions to join the Liangshan bandits, Dahai has no choice but to become an outlaw. As he embarks on his journey of vindictive killing, the classic Shanxi opera scene ‘Lin Chong Flees by Night’ is being performed on stage in the village street-plaza. Here, the real-life rebel and the theatrical figure mirror and reinforce each other. Dahai at this juncture transforms from an abject outcast into a virile hero, a *xia* who rebels against oppression.

Zhou San’s desire to escape the inertia of his rural life and find meaning elsewhere resembles that of knights-errant. These men and women pursue their ideals in *Jianghu*—an alternate society at the ‘geographic and moral margins of settled society’ (Hamm, 2005: 17). When Zhou travels across the country on his motorcycle, he wears a Chicago Bulls beanie, which is a potent symbol of what he aspires to be. Belonging to one of the most legendary teams in the NBA, the bull logo symbolizes confidence and valor. It apparently represents Zhou San’s ego ideal. In appearance it also harkens back to the Ox of the Chinese zodiacs. Zhou San’s zodiacal paragon, however, is shadowed by a double that constantly haunts and disturbs. As he tries to escape capture after committing a crime, a truck carrying tethered cattle stubbornly obstructs his path. If the cattle represent the moribund rural existence of Zhou San’s peers, Zhou San’s bull symbol represents his pursuit of a radically different fate.

The film adroitly connects Zhou San with the gangster heroes in Hong Kong gunplay movies, which have gained immense popularity among young people since the 1980s. In a scene aboard a bus, the camera pans slowly to Zhou, pauses succinctly, and shifts to the crossfire on a nearby television, relating him to the heroes onscreen. Recalling Xiao Mage (*Still Life*), who nostalgically mimics the gestures of Chow Yun-fat in John Woo’s films, Zhou San gives new life to John Woo’s tough-guy characters. A lone killer, Zhou San is professional and ruthless, able to dispatch muggers with a few gunshots and conduct a scrupulously planned robbery. His persona

runs counter to the callow youths in *Unknown Pleasures*, who join forces to stage ‘one of the most morose and anticlimactic bank heist scenes in cinema history’ (McGrath 2007: 105). However, despite having undertaken armed robbery, Zhou San is not strictly motivated by money. He is driven by his obsession with firearms, which he praises to his wife because ‘they aren’t boring.’ Shooting guns thus allows him to dispel the boredom that village life so doggedly instills. On new year’s eve, he wields his weapon and makes his own fireworks as the firework show lights up the urban sky on the other side. Playing with this overtly phallic object enables Zhou to combat the forces that emasculate and enervate rural youths in China’s neoliberal economy.

While Zhou San chooses his own zodiac symbol, Xiaoyu goes further, pondering upon the very categorizations of human beings and beasts. Inspired by a TV show, she grows interested in the question of whether animals can commit suicide. Xiaoyu’s interest derives less from the curiosity about animals than a concern with how people should perceive each other. Ought we to regard others as sentient, free-willed beings or as disposable objects? Disagreeing with her coworker’s assumption of animals, Xiaoyu insists on understanding them by assuming their point of view. Her attempt to empathize leads her to identify with the ‘holy snake,’ which she encounters while fleeing her lover’s vengeful wife. Inside the gloomy interior of a van, the girl sits still like an idol, surrounded by crawling snakes. By touting her as a snake goddess, the business trickery effects a double alienation, first reducing her to the state of an animal and then selling her as a commodity. Xiaoyu’s experience with her money-throwing clients analogizes her position to that of the girl, since both fall prey to the furious scheming of consumer culture.

Yet, unlike the girl, Xiaoyu refuses to surrender herself to this prescribed role. Instead, she challenges its legitimacy. Jia Zhangke compares Xiaoyu’s obstinacy to that of Green Snake

(Xiaoqing) from the well-known Chinese folktale *Legend of the White Snake*. Unlike her sister, the gentle and pliant White Snake, Green Snake is particularly unruly, disdainful of both human etiquette and social taboos. Interestingly, Jia chooses to not invoke the time-honored folktale, which traditionally centers on White Snake. Instead he alludes to the 1993 film *Green Snake*, directed by the Hong Kong new waver Tsui Hark. As the film's change of title suggests, Tsui Hark shifts his cinematic focus onto Green Snake, allowing him to subvert the domestic, conformist values White Snake signifies. Tsui's film is screened in the rest area for the staff and masseuses. This familiar *mise-en-scene*—a sealed space filled with lethargic dozers and sound sleepers—evokes Lu Xun's iconic metaphor of the iron house. Following Lu Xun's century-old effort to awaken his countrymen, Jia Zhangke appropriates Tsui's film to raise heightened awareness of structural violence. This petition for awakening seems to enter Xiaoyu's subconscious and inspire her later resistance.

The film brings Xiaoyu's *xia* characteristics into full view by identifying her with the female knight-errant named Yang Huizhen in King Hu's film *A Touch of Zen*. As the warrior-daughter of an upright minister executed by the Chief Eunuch of the Ming dynasty, Yang together with her father's friends is hunted to the borderlands, where fierce struggles unfold. Intrepid and decisive, Yang has made herself an archetypal female *xia*, whose dive into the bamboo forest during a fight marks one of the most stunning sequences in the martial arts genre. In many respects, Xiaoyu has the air of Yang Huizhen. Tying her hair into a high ponytail, dressing neatly in white, and traversing the vast urban and suburban landscape in solitude, Xiaoyu emerges as a modern female knight-errant. Importantly, her highly stylized stabbing brings out the *wuxia* theme of the film in a most recognizable fashion. When discussing King Hu's *A Touch of Zen*, Mary Farquhar observes that "his [Hu's] innovation was to conceptualise

martial arts action as operatic dance” (2003: 221). A legacy of King Hu, action choreography has now become “a staple of the genre” (ibid.). Xiaoyu’s choreographed move conjures up the theatricality of action in martial arts tradition. Her still posture following the fast-moving slashes also visualizes what David Bordwell terms as the balance between “posed stilled and swift attack or defense” (2001: 82) frequently seen in martial arts movies. Here, Xiaoyu, no longer a muzzled victim, has become a *xia* and gained agency. Like Yang, she protests out of desperation, but unlike Yang, she fights to retain her dignity more than life.

In the last story, Xiaohui’s fate is tied to that of ‘Little Bird’ (xiaoxiao niao), which is Xiaohui’s online screen name. The Chinese word for ‘bird’ (niao) is a slang term for penis. Lianrong exploits the coincidence to joke about Xiaohui’s size. Xiaohui’s naming of himself as ‘Little Bird’ bespeaks a felt symbolic castration, registering his thwarted manhood. In fact, his name is derived from a 1990s pop song called ‘I Am a Little Bird.’ Jia Zhangke has gained notice for the popular music, he uses profusely, as a tool of social investigation and critique (Szeto, 2009). A famous line from this song goes ‘I am a little bird; I want to fly but can’t fly higher, however I try.’ The situation of the little bird prefigures the fate of Xiaohui, for whom the hope of social ascent is tragically remote in the maelstrom of drastic social changes.

In contrast with the first three stories—which evoke fictional redemptive heroes such as Lin Chong and the woman warrior Yang Huizhen—Xiaohui’s section focuses squarely on the here and now, though its ‘everyday’ occurrences fall nothing short of spectacular. Xiaohui belongs to a younger generation. It is one that lives on a quotidian, rather than a heroic, scale. No longer inspired so much by artistic works, its members sink squarely into, or find themselves ensnared by, a mundane life of material production and consumption. Michael Berry rightly observes that, “in an age where the ‘product’ and the ‘bottom line’ rule the day, art and

performance is no longer used to convey political ideals or even personal dreams, they simply become tools to serve corporate interests and fuel consumerist desires” (2009: 113). A small flame of heroism in Xiaohui is quickly extinguished when his offer to take Lianrong out of prostitution is refused on the grounds of his poverty; Lianrong knows that Xiaohui could scarcely manage to feed her and her daughter. The popular legend of a hero rescuing the beauty has lost its charm in Xiaohui’s world. He remains ‘a little bird’ for whom ‘happiness is but a never-approachable legend,’ as the song runs.

Xiaohui’s response to objective violence takes the form of self-destruction. The modern technology of power and governmentality so cunningly diffuses responsibility that he does not know whom to retaliate against when it drives him to a crisis point. Employing both a stable camera and a protracted long take, Jia records the dismal moment when Xiaohui sits on the edge of a bed to watch the comings and goings of his roommates, all fellow wage-laborers too weary to even greet each other. Only the monotonous electronic score (composed by Jia’s longtime collaborator Lin Qiang) breaks the silence, heightening the sense of existential emptiness and spiritual bankruptcy. Xiaohui’s exasperation thus turns inward and triggers the death drive. Jumping off the balcony of his dormitory building, he ends his life with a final, solemn attempt at flight. In a tragic fashion, Xiaohui achieves a symbolic escape from the net of social power encircling him.

What links the protagonists’ styles of violence—variously eruptive, contrived, reactive or self-destructive—is the spirit of resistance. Their defiance, however ethically controversial or disconcerting, marks them as *xia*, a rare breed in the world of today.<sup>6</sup> Commenting on their struggles, Jia Zhangke (2013b) says, ‘I admire their rebellious spirit. This is something that is vanishing in China as we have got so used to the state of being oppressed by authorities.’ By

underscoring the *xia* ethos, Jia urges viewers to take more notice of prevalent social injustice and consider not just violence, but the circumstances that give rise to it.

Weaving together objective camera and subjective lyricism, illustrated by his integration of pop music, animal symbolism, and theatrical performance, Jia Zhangke layers dimensions of history and human emotions that might otherwise have escaped cinematic portrayal. This hybrid narrative strategy has long existed in Jia's body of work. One thinks of the vignettes of flash animation in *The World* (2004), which showed normally reticent migrants expressing their inner yearnings. One also recalls the delicately deployed archeological clocks that disclose the heterogeneity of space-time and the surreal levitation of a demolished building in *Still Life*. In her analysis of Jia's *24 City*, Hsiu-Chuang Deppman (2014) terms such a blend of documentary and fiction as 'docufiction.'<sup>7</sup> Recognizing Jia's attempt to transcend the limitations of post-socialist realism in navigating psychological depths, Deppman suggests that 'Jia draws on the strengths of both genres to account for Chinese workers' emotional struggles with their declining fortunes' (189). Likewise, the cinematic strategy of using animal signs and fictional heroes in *A Touch of Sin* serves Jia's purpose of capturing a transforming reality rather than undermining it, allowing for a deeper engagement with the rich inner lives of these rebels. By detailing the psychological experience of the 'criminals' whose stories are not supposed to be heard, Jia restores them to their human roles, critiquing the reductive official version of history and reality by providing an alternate one.

### **Conclusion: 'Do you understand your sin?'**

Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* is among the few cinematic attempts to capture and probe into the intractable issue of violence in contemporary China. Instead of dwelling on the individual violent acts, Jia lays out the social, historical, and political circumstances in which

these tragic incidents take place. In so doing, he brings to view what Žižek calls ‘objective violence,’ a hidden, and thus more insidious, structural violence. In illustrative vignettes, he recounts the country’s collaboration with global capital to impose injustice upon the underprivileged and the disenfranchised in post-socialist China. Evoking the martial arts tradition, Jia portrays the protagonists as *xia* whose commendably rebellious spirits invite reflection on problems posed by the social status quo. Jia weaves blatantly artificial threads through his cinematic tapestry, including zodiac symbolism, stage performance, and martial arts episodes. The blend of genres that results illuminates the inner lives of people once consigned to the shadows. In its portrayals of social schism, inequality, and injustice, this film exposes the sins of the state, probing deeply into moments of despair, loneliness and disgrace of ordinary people. These feats make it a poignant social critique and a chivalrous act of knight-errantry in itself.

*A Touch of Sin* concerns itself less with individual fate than the existential state of the masses. As Wang Hui points out, ‘Jia Zhangke’s films display a type of collective fate. He concentrates on depicting characters, but these characters do not become estranged from the group’ (2011: 224). Indeed, the four protagonists are not isolated but intimately related to one another. Jia ties them together via unperceived chance encounters and shared fates to highlight their interconnectedness. The nomadic Zhou San is the thread that connects them: He crosses paths on his motorcycle with Dahai, an onlooker to an accident; he rides on the same long-distance bus to Yichang with Xiaoyu’s lover and former boss, whose garment factory briefly employed Xiaohui. They share not only the same space, but also the same moral predicament. At the mercy of capital and continuously changing social forces, they all find themselves fatally far behind however hard they try. Far from being sporadic incidents in fixed locales, for Jia, the dehumanization and retaliatory violence he depicts are a nationwide epidemic. It moves across

the whole of China, from a coalmining town in Shanxi province in the north to an outlying village in the southwest, and from Yichang in central China to the emerging coastal city Dongguan. In this way, Jia makes palpable the vast scope and urgency of violence, calling it to the attention of all viewers. However, rich and poor alike tend to ignore this social problem. Indifferent masses of onlookers like these were precisely the groups that caused Lu Xun, a century ago, and now Jia mortifying pain.<sup>8</sup>

Jia wraps up his film with an extraordinary scene, spurring us to consider our own roles as spectators. We are shown Xiaoyu walking along the foot of a city wall, a relic of the past, against the sandstorm provoked obviously by present-day excessive resource extractions. Symbolically, she is making her way at the crossroads between China's past and its transition to an unknown future. She enters a throng rushing past her to see the classical opera *Yu Tang Chun*.<sup>9</sup> The scene Jia sets her in reprises the famous closing sequence in *Yellow Earth* (1984), in which Hanhan turns away from the crowd, following a different path.<sup>10</sup> Assuming Xiaoyu's position from a distance, the camera discloses a spectacle-watching occasion: the crowd is savoring the stage performance of the trial of the courtesan, Su San, who has been framed for a crime. This establishing shot imparts the distance necessary for us to recognize the parallel position between the crowd and us. Just as they relish Su San's fall from privilege, we notice ourselves relishing the violent spectacle onscreen. Jia then cuts to a medium shot and pans slowly through the faces of the crowd of which Xiaoyu is now a part. On stage, the magistrate asks Su San sternly, 'Do you understand your sin?' Instead of showing Su San, Jia cuts back to the audience. While this question weighs on Xiaoyu, causing her eyes to sparkle with tears, the rest of the people show little emotional involvement. The film ends with a freeze-frame shot of the crowd standing there and watching blankly. The magistrate's question, ostensibly posed to Su San, can just as easily



be posed to the crowd and all viewers of the film. Denouncing voyeuristic pleasures derived from others' suffering, Jia challenges his audience to examine their active, silent or frozen complicity with the violence inherent in larger discourses.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, Justin Chang (2013) highlights *A Touch of Sin*'s resemblance to the works of Quentin Tarantino and Takashi Miike, claiming it to be 'unquestionably Jia's most mainstream-friendly work.'

<sup>2</sup> The article does not intend to offer an overall assessment of neoliberalism in China. Rather, it takes interest in how Jia Zhangke reminds us of the oft-overlooked human costs during China's neoliberalization process and how Jia's film contributes to our understanding of everyday violence in the contemporary era. For detailed discussions on China's neoliberal practice and its entanglement with the state, see Ong (2006) and Rofel (2007).

<sup>3</sup> Tony Rayns contributed to the English subtitles for *A Touch of Sin*.

<sup>4</sup> The irony is that the CCP leadership has often coined corruption and increased inequality as the most pressing social issues today. However, the CCP pronounces these terms more like a public performance. The goal is to appease the disadvantaged by giving them a false hope rather than encourage a thorough investigation of the root of these social malaises. The anti-corruption campaign, for instance, targets some individual corrupt officials, leaving grave problems lying within the political and legal system of the CCP government largely unchecked. It is in this sense that class is a repressed issue, one that is prohibited from any further in-depth discussion.

<sup>5</sup> Ironically, the image of Mao remains glaringly present on the 100 bill of RMB. However, no longer evoking socialist ideals such as equality and social justice, Mao is there only to represent the Party of which he is a founder. Mao's image thus functions to legitimize the Party's rule. In this light, the design of the one hundred-dollar bill discloses thoroughly the Party-run state's fusion with global capital.

<sup>6</sup> In his interview with *The New York Times*, Jia Zhangke (2013c) clarifies that his intent is by no means to approve actions of violence. He says, 'Violence is extremely destructive. I hope that the audience will understand these characters as I do but not identify with their methods.'

<sup>7</sup> With regard to the discussion on Jia's melding fiction with documentary, see also Shu-chin Wu (2011) and Jiwei Xiao (2011). While Wu examines how Jia's hybrid narrative strategy contributes to a layered understanding of time and history, Xiao concentrates on such a mixture's efficacy in divulging personal memory while forestalling nostalgia.

<sup>8</sup> Lu Xun was utterly concerned with the bystander gesture of many Chinese people in the early twentieth century. As Michael Berry observes, "The crowd of onlookers is a motif that occurs throughout Lu Xun's fictional universe, starting at the madman in 'diary of a madman' eagerly awaiting the execution in 'medicine,' cheering at the legendary decapitation slide in 'Preface to call to Arms' or gawking at Ah Q in disappointment when he gets shot instead of decapitated in the *True story of Ah Q*" (2009: 47). Jia Zhangke has carried on this motif of Lu Xun's in his own works. In the final scene of *Xiao Wu*, for

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example, we see that the crowd of observers surrounds the protagonist, Xiao Wu, savoring his public humiliation. For detailed analysis of this scene, see Berry (2009) and Liu (2006).

<sup>9</sup> The play is adapted from the popular novel *Yu Tang Chun Meets Her Husband*, written by Feng Menglong (1574-1646). It is set in the Ming dynasty, telling the love story of Courtesan Su San, known as Yu Tangchun, and a young scholar. The most famous episode of this play is when Su San, having been framed for a crime, is on trial during the re-examination of her case. Su San's wrong is finally rectified with the help of her former lover, now an official, and the lovers reunite at the end of the play.

<sup>10</sup> Jia Zhangke has admitted on many occasions that it was Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* that incited his passion for cinema.

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