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Displaced in the Simulacrum: Migrant Workers and Urban Space in *The World*

Yanjie Wang

In the past couple of years, the imposing ceremony of the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing and the Shanghai 2010 World Expo attracted much attention of the world. Neither of the events is short of the epic ambition of China in flaunting its success and erecting historical monuments. Similar to Beijing, where massive projects of cityscape reconstruction had been launched for the Olympics, Shanghai became a site of massive refurbishing in 2002, soon after it won the bid to host the 2010 World Expo. Over the past several years, the Shanghai Government has been devoted to upgrading the infrastructure of the city with new roads, bridges, tunnels, and even a new subway-line. Central to the urban planning of Shanghai to accommodate this grand event is the construction of the World Expo Garden, which is populated with scores of national pavilions, as well as sports arenas and performance art centers. For this theme garden, Shanghai cleared approximately two square miles along the two sides of the Huangpu River, relocating more than ten thousand families and hundreds of factories previously situated in this area. During the process of the large-scale demolition and reconstruction involved in preparation for the Shanghai World Expo, one cannot ignore the numerous migrant workers who swarmed into the city and contributed tremendously to the completion of one project after another. However, ironically, their presence in Shanghai has been both revealed and concealed: they are obviously visible but remain unnoticed by many. As a major component of the floating population, the migrant workers were supposed to sojourn the city only briefly, bound to leave after the reconstruction was over. Thus, in spite of their pivotal role in providing cheap labor to rebuild the city, migrant workers have not been afforded any space in the spectacular tapestry of Shanghai.

At this historical juncture of the Shanghai World Expo, Jia Zhangke's film, *The World* (2004), is of particular interest to the investigation of the crisscross of migrant workers and the cityscape. Featuring an incomparable array of architecture, the Shanghai World Expo Garden easily conjures up the World Park in Beijing, which is composed of miniature replicas of many famous sites all over the world: the Eiffel Tower, London Bridge, the World Trade Center, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, the Taj Mahal, the Great Pyramids, and so on. Since its opening in 1993, Beijing World Park has attracted countless visitors who desire a glimpse of the world and to enjoy a visual feast. *The World* is primarily set in the World Park in Beijing, which marks a shift in Jia Zhangke's cinematic focus on the small townscape, best known in his hometown trilogy, *Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002).¹ Nonetheless, *The World* is not so much a showcase of the cosmopolitan city of Beijing than an internal perspective of the city beneath the veneer of its prosperity.

While cities such as Beijing and Shanghai tend to efface the migrant workers from their landscape, *The World* puts them in the spotlight. The film follows a group of migrant workers who have come to Beijing seeking employment, fortune, and romance. The two main characters, Xiaotao and Taisheng, are from the same village in Shanxi. Both work in the World Park. The

cinematic narrative advances along their love affair and culminates in their suicidal death, creating a melancholic ambience that pervades the film. What does Jia Zhangke intend to say about the city and the migrant workers who dwell within? What is the significance of the World Park with regards to both characters? How to understand the dream and despair of migrant workers painted poignantly in this film? To answer these questions, this paper takes the iconography of the World Park as the point of entry to reveal the implications in the film. Through this particular space-image, this paper aims to determine out how migrant workers relate to the city and in what way the city has shaped them. In a contextualized reading, this paper argues that only under the light of China's adoption of global capitalism and the altered urban-rural relationship in the post-socialist era can we fully understand the failed negotiations of migrant workers with the city and with themselves.

In the Simulacrum: Mobility, Fixity, and Border Crossing

The World is a story concerning the dialectic of mobility and fixity of migrant laborers. Inspired by the dream to become prosperous, the protagonists, Xiaotao and Taisheng, come to Beijing to pursue a better life. The Beijing World Park ends up serving as the stage upon which they attempt to realize the dream; Xiaotao becomes a performer for various shows offered by the park, while Taisheng becomes a sophisticated park security guard.

The cinematic setting of the World Park is imbued with a number of implications. The World Park promises its visitors the opportunity to travel around the world without needing to go abroad. The very existence of such a theme park speaks of the intensity of the fascination of China with the idea of integrating with the world in whatever manner. The problem, however, lies in the world as defined by the World Park; the world is now reduced to a mere cluster of miniatures of the signature architectures of a range of nations. The park's presentation of the world involves double distortion: an arbitrary selection of national symbols and their disproportional replication. In this case, the world projected by the World Park is, to borrow Baudrillard's notion, a simulacrum that bears no reality of the original (Baudrillard, 1994). The copy of images and signs has claimed the truth, rendering the reality meaningless. In this light, the World Park has produced a copy of the world without the original. A sense of misrecognition of the true picture of the world dominates the perception and imagination of park visitors, as well as the group of migrant laborers working in the park.

The spectacular "world" of the park seems to have mesmerized its workers, fostering a sense of mobility and connection to the world. Riding on the tourist train that travels around the park, Xiaotao tells Taisheng over the phone that she is heading for India (a site in the park) as if she were on the way to the actual India (the country). Xiaotao seems to be gratified by the figurative mobility provided by the park.



Fig. 1 Xiaotao rides on the tourist train of the park

In another scene, two friends (Er Guniang and Sanlai) from their village come to ask help from Taisheng to find employment in Beijing. Since it is their first time in the park, Taisheng enthusiastically gives them a tour of the Eiffel Tower and London Bridge. As they move along, Taisheng boasts of the intactness of the park's Twin Towers, even after the collapse of the real World Trade Center during the 2001 terrorist attack. Obviously, Taisheng is deeply proud of working in such a place, with the world so near at hand. A sense of admiration rises in Er Guniang and Sanlai following this "eye-opening" visit. While the park invokes enchantment, the camerawork of Jia helps lay bare a story much like "The Emperor's New Clothes." The continuous shots featuring the limited space of the World Park shrouded in gloomy mist only reminds the audience of the falsehood of the so-called world, which is nothing but a simulacrum that distorts and deceives.

One may argue that the migrant laborers at least enjoy certain mobility in flowing into the cities. Seemingly, these workers are in a favorable position to experience urban wealth and culture. Aihwa Ong brings up the concept of flexible citizenship in the era of globalization, which, in her words, denotes "the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions" (Ong, 1999:6). Ong's account promotes an upgraded flexibility that moves beyond the territorial and political constraints of an increasingly globalized world. Such observation contains a fraction of truth in the Chinese context, as the Chinese people have gained more freedom to travel both domestically and internationally since the reform and opening-up of China in the 1980s. Within the tides of social migration, the rural-urban (a rather unidirectional flow) migration has surged up in post-Mao China. The decollectivization reform in the countryside (redistribution of the collective land to individual households) has unfettered the peasants from the rural land. Peasants newly released from the land soon became the labor supply to the urban economy, which has great need of cheap laborers. Such condition seems to be mutually ideal for both sides. Xiaotao and Taisheng are merely tiny drops in the huge wave of Chinese labor migration.

However, the film tells a different story: migrating to the city by no means promises a rosy future, not even a fair deal. When Er Guniang asks about how much he earns, Erxiao, another security guard of the park, is ashamed to answer. Erxiao knows that 200 RMB (30 USD) a month is way too low an amount to show off to his countrymen. The film leaves its audience wondering how Erxiao manages to live in the city with such a low income.



Fig. 2 Er Guniang inquires about Erxiao's salary

Jia Zhangke shows no mercy in destroying the dreams of migrant workers through his camera, which navigates beneath the magnificent surface of the World Park, revealing a grim reality. Far less than the experience of mobility, the migrant workers of the park are trapped in a small morbid dormitory. The confined living space of these laborers ironically represents the glamour of an unbounded imagination of the world. The excitement of Xiaotao to ride on the tourist train to visit India or America wears off as the reality of life hits her in a vehement way. The film aggravates the irony via the advertisement of the park: we are told that the entire route of the train only takes fifteen minutes to complete. The film brings to the fore the illusive nature of the mobility with which post-socialist China promises to endow the peasants.

A passport brings home the twist in mobility and fixity concerning the migrant workers. Essentially, a passport is simply a necessity for international travel. However, possessing a passport has already transcended its functional value to many. A passport implies rather power and social status enjoyed exclusively by the upper class. Only the elite have the privilege of crossing the national borders as they desire. The film, however, uses this symbol differently. One day, the ex-boyfriend of Xiaotao bids her farewell. He is leaving for an upcoming sojourn, and his possession of a passport arouses the curiosity of Xiaotao. Xiaotao sighs in a jealous tone, "How nice to have a passport! You are about to go abroad!" Although she knows that his destination is Mongolia and that he, too, will simply be a migrant laborer there, Xiaotao cannot help attaching a meaning of social advantage to his passport.



Fig. 3 Xiao Tao takes a look at her ex-boyfriend's passport

A parallel figure to the ex-boyfriend of Xiaotao is the Russian woman Anna, who initially works with Xiaotao as a dancer in the park, but who later leaves the park in search of a higher paying job. Anna had left her country and her children, trying hard to make a living in China. The mixed emotions of non-fulfillment and isolation connect Xiaotao and Anna. Xiaotao befriends her despite their language barrier. Xiaotao herself discovers that the fate of Anna is no better than her own. One night Xiaotao is asked by her roommate Qun to sing karaoke with some rich businessmen. Uncomfortable with the customer's advances, Xiaotao flees to the restroom, where she bumps onto Anna. Anna, heavily made up, has become a prostitute in the same nightclub. Saddened at the sight of each other, they weep heavily in each other's arms. Anna indeed serves as a mirror of both Xiaotao and Xiaotao's boyfriend. It is little wonder that the situation of Xiaotao's ex-boyfriend in Mongolia would not be significantly different from her own or that of Anna.



Fig. 4 Xiaotao runs into Anna at the nightclub's restroom.

Such a fate likewise befalls Miss Liao, a petite migrant entrepreneur from Wenzhou with whom Taisheng has an affair. The passport looms large in her life as she waits to have her visa approved, in order to join her husband in France, where many Wenzhou migrants are engaged in garment manufacturing and sales in Belleville (Chinatown in France). Her dream seems to have come true in the end; however, we never see her actual fate. Would her situation in France end up resembling the fate of Anna in China, with no foreseeable future? To what extent would her cramped attic in “Zhejiang Village” (a migrant enclave in Beijing with Wenzhou people forming its core population) prefigure her workspace in Belleville? ² Does the possibility of travel from the countryside to the city, and from one country to another, necessarily grant the migrant workers social mobility? The film seems to paint a rather gloomy picture, drawing our attention to the underlying truth of fixity that migrant workers have to face. The passport trope of the film speaks precisely the paradox of mobility and fixity: the mobility of cheap labor, as an imperative in the capitalistic development, leads only to the fixity of the workers on their working spot and within a minimal domain of daily life.



Fig. 5 At Miss Liao's attic, she mentions to Taisheng “Belleville,” where her husband dwells in France.

The World Park adeptly caters to the popular desire for an unbounded mobility via the promise of “Travel around the world within one day!” In essence, the park is a commodity for consumption, a commercial enterprise without any difference from Disneyland or Universal Studios, making profit out of the commodification and reproduction of cultural symbols (e.g., well-known architecture). Instead of a dreamland, the park is, in Marx's notion, an object of fetishism that obscures the individual labor and human relations it involves (Marx, 1972). Hidden beneath the splendid surface of the park is the labor of migrant workers and their crude residence. The operation of the park is built upon the exploitation workers who are gravely underpaid and poorly accommodated. ³ Displaced in the World Park, Xiaotao and Taisheng can

neither satisfy their desire for freedom nor make their fortunes. The park is not even a contact zone where they may feel the pulsation of the city; the world of the simulacrum provides them nothing real or original. Rather, they fall into the limited working space dominated by the logic of capitalism. Thereby, the film potently disputes the acclamation of universal mobility in China. The flexible citizenship Ong describes belongs exclusively to the elite class. The migrant workers have no access to such a luxurious lifestyle.

Nonetheless, the film appears double-sided: while it dashes the hope of its characters (as discussed above), the movie aids the same people to transcend the restrictions to which they are prescribed. One special feature of this film is the interspersion of the animated scenes in the realistic narrative. A closer look will allow us to discern that the film employs animation to fulfill the dream of Xiaotao and Taisheng for mobility. The cellular phone serves as the medium that connects the characters to a virtual space. In the film, whenever the characters type a text message, the scene would be followed by an animation illustrating the border-crossing experiences of Xiaotao or Taisheng. In one animated scene, Xiaotao takes a “real” train (not a sightseeing train) heading out of the park. She hovers freely in the sky in another scene, forming a contrast to her role as a flight attendant in a non-functional airplane in the park. In the animation, Taisheng is able to realize his ambition of flying an airplane, rather than being a fake pilot in a stationary airplane. The irony, however, lies in the fact that the grandeur of their dream is an exact representation of the illusiveness of freedom and upward mobility in real life. In this light, the animated scenes both motivate and discourage.



Fig. 6 In an animation scene, Xiaotao soars in the sky.

The author of this critique, however, argues that the function of the animation is not limited to spelling out this ironic twist; one must pay attention to the means of representation itself. Contrary to the realism category commonly ascribed to the films of Jia Zhangke, the animated portions of the film instead demonstrate a surrealist dimension.⁴ If realism demands an authentic portrayal of reality (although an impossible mission), surrealism urges one to weigh the medium itself and to infer what the medium conveys. The animation obstructs the coherent flow of filmic narrative, directing the attention of the audience from the story to the means of representation, based on which the dreams of Xiaotao and Taisheng would be realized. To a

certain extent, animation might not speak of imagination but of something that have taken place. Put differently, possibly, it is a manifestation of how the dream of a person is constructed. Unquestionably, unbounded mobility and ascension to wealth and power are repeatedly propagated by the Chinese media in the Reform rhetoric. Xiaotao and Taisheng are both subjected to the appeal of this promise. Their dream is a product created and mediated by various media that trumpet social mobility in post-socialist China. What ensues after the animation scenes (or the realization of the dreams) is unfailingly a return to confined spaces such as the park, Miss Liao's congested attic, or a dark hotel basement room. Such a sequence visualizes the contradiction between the promised mobility and the actual fixity into which the migrant workers have been caught.

We have discussed that the film reveals the fetishization of the World Park, obliterating the traces of exploitation of migrant workers. In this film, Jia Zhangke reveals the lives of the characters as conditioned by the code of global capitalism that is dominant in the post-socialist discourse of China. *The World* implicitly points to an invisible yet determinant party entailed in the migrant worker issue: the state. On one hand, since the late 1970s, the Chinese government has loosened the *hukou* system (Chinese household registration system), allowing more peasants to move to the city, in order to meet the need of the city for cheap labor and to feed the engine of the market economy of China. On the other hand, the state attempts to maintain the rural-urban divide, withholding the migrant workers from acquiring urban citizenship. Although they work and live in the city, migrant workers have been denied of basic welfare and public services that the government bestows upon urban citizens. Migrant workers may be repatriated to the countryside whenever deemed necessary. As Gary Xu rightly pinpoints, the root for the ruthless exploitation of migrant workers lies in "the institutionalized and symbolic exclusion of the floating population from the city" (Xu, 2007: 70). The Reform policy of Deng Xiaoping officially sanctioned developmentalism as the indisputable truth for China. The Chinese government has since focused on the economic growth at the expense of social equality. One consequence is the widening social gap. The Reform policy shows decided privilege in the urban managerial group, the newly emerging middle class in China. The alliance of the state with the urban middle class further marginalizes the migrant workers.⁵ Being the beneficiary of the Reform policy in terms of material wealth and social power, the middle class has bonded their interest with the state, which leads them to rationalize and legitimize the social stratification. As seen in the neoliberal rhetoric prevalent among the social elite, the middle class deems social inequality as a necessary means for the development of China. Such concept explains why migrant workers, as the disenfranchised group, are visible on the cityscape and yet are not recognized.

A New Selfhood? Wound, Romance, and the Specter of Death

The World does not merely debunk the pretension of mobility that urban space promises to migrant workers, the movie also probes the inferiority of these workers as they wrestle with a new sense of personhood in their displacement. The film opens with a long camera shot following the female protagonist Xiaotao. Dressed in a gaudy dancing costume, Xiaotao walks the long hallway of the backstage begging for a bandage for her wounded ankle.



Fig. 7 The film opens with Xiaotao's persistent begging of BandAid.

In the four-minute-long shot, the camera penetrates nearly every corner of the murky space populated by the migrant-workers-turned performers. The waves of applause occasionally transmitting from the glamorous front stage are only intensified the darkness of the backstage. This contrast, together with the wound of Xiaotao, is replete with implication. An immediate impression is the gap between the visual spectacle the World Park presents to its visitors and the filthy space it offers to the workers. This gap parallels Xiaotao and the other performers' schizophrenic perception of self: whereas their impersonation as cultural models from all over the world has enabled them to celebrate a cosmopolitan self, their return to the backstage reminds them of their true identity as migrant workers. There exists perpetual rupture between the performed identity of laborers and who they really are. One can easily associate the stage with the modern urban space, and the backstage crowded with performers with their rural origin. The above-mentioned contrastive relations are the ramifications of the growing rural and urban disparity taking place in post-socialist China. The socio-historical rupture of a nation as it moved from a socialist to post-socialist era has left traces on individuals, as signified by the wound of Xiaotao. Migrant workers such as Xiaotao have undergone a chain of displacements from the countryside to the city, and from the dream of becoming part of the city to the reality of living in a simulacrum. Beneath the physical injury of Xiaotao lies her schizophrenic psyche. This holds for all the other migrant workers. Similar to the difficulties she encounters to obtain her bandage, the journey of Xiaotao to seek remedy for her fractured self is doomed to be rough.

In the opening scene, Xiaotao walks around wounded. Apparently, the wound had been inflicted in the past, even before she enters the cinematic setting. What wounds do Xiaotao or the migrant workers as a whole have in the first place? Are they filled with bitter experiences from back in their homes in the countryside? The critique of Hairong Yan on post-Mao rural policy gives a clue to these questions. She writes, "The discourse of modernity in the post-Mao era thus produces the countryside both materially and ideologically as a wasteland stripped of state investment and inhabited by moribund tradition, with the two dimensions mutually reinforcing each other" (Yan, 2003:587). The countryside has been seriously marginalized, if not completely left out of the blueprint of China's post-socialist modernization project. The Reform era has been practicing "incomplete urbanization" (Chan, 1994), focusing solely on the cities. The dual social

security system from Mao's era, based on the urban-rural divide and reinforced by the *hukou* system, has remained intact. Unlike the urban residents whose well-being is guaranteed by the state, the farmers are only appointed to a piece of land.⁶ The lack of attention and investment has resulted in the tardiness, even stagnancy, of the rural development of China. Consequently, the countryside can hardly provide the rural youth with material success or modern subjectivity. Home as a dead land in this sense constitutes the primal trauma of migrant workers: they see no meaning or hope in their homeland. Moving to the cities is not merely a physical relocation, but an amputation of one's past from the semantic system; thereby, a wound. Quite possibly, such condition accounts for the melancholic sentiment that saturates the film.

Xiaotao and Taisheng are but two among the millions of rural youth streaming in the city for good. Their romance is encumbered with the struggles concerning selfhood in the city. Burdened by the patriarchal values yet ingrained in her village, Xiaotao, a woman of self-esteem and independency, considers the city an ideal place for liberation. The film clearly shows that she treasures a life of freedom and unfettered mobility, more than anyone else. However, life has played a big joke on her. As discussed, her experience in the city is immensely circumspect. The range of her daily duty and activity is limited within the parameters of the park. Yearning to know what the outside world is like, she buys a telescope from Anna. Looking into the distance while on top of the dormitory with her fellow workers is a rare occasion of excitement. Her ideal for mobility seems too close yet too far, similar to the view in the telescope.



Fig.8 Xiaotao gazes far into the city of Beijing through the telescope.

The disparity between her desired personhood and the unfavorable situation endlessly frustrates Xiaotao. At one point, Xiaotao complains to Taisheng that she has become a ghost living in the confined space of the park. Alluding to the figure of the white-haired girl in a well-known Communist propagandist opera who turned into a ghost-like being under the suppression of the old society and was later rescued by the Chinese Communist Party,⁷ the film verbalizes the poignant self-identification of the migrant workers in the "new" society. The sensitivity of Xiaotao soon leads her to the realization of the unattainability of a new selfhood.

While, in comparison to Xiaotao, Taisheng seems to adjust more quickly to the norm of the city, he is constantly seized by a feeling of insecurity. Taisheng comes to the city, hoping for a successful career. His ambition for power and higher social status is best captured in the moment when he first appears on the screen: he takes an elevator to the top of the Eiffel Tower, allegedly the highest point in the park. Taisheng has achieved certain success in that he has been placed in charge of the security of the park. His connection with an underground labor society also earns him extra money. Nonetheless, he lacks confidence in himself, as demonstrated by his insecurity in relation to his girlfriend Xiaotao. He worries that Xiaotao will eventually throw herself into the arms of some urbanites to whom he helplessly feels inferior. Thus, Taisheng grabs every chance to demonstrate his masculinity, such as riding a white horse while on duty in the park, imagining himself the Prince Charming of damsels in distress. Ironically, his masculinity is threatened by nothing other than his romance with Xiaotao.



Fig. 9 Taisheng goes on patrol at the park, riding on the white horse.

The core problem of the romance of Xiaotao and Taisheng rests on their contrasting attitudes toward virginity. Although in a stable loving relationship with Taisheng, Xiaotao insists on retaining her virginity until their marriage, regardless of Taisheng's repeated requests and his oath of fidelity. Why does Xiaotao care so much about her virginity? One can easily attribute this to the pernicious influence of patriarchal traditions that place excessive stress on female chastity. Nonetheless, Xiaotao's holding on to her virginity may suggest more of her inability to forge a new self in the city; thus, her body has become the only site to claim her value. Agonized deeply by what he perceives as potential unfaithfulness of Xiaotao, Taisheng asks her sarcastically: "Who are you reserving it for if not me?" For Taisheng, an urban competitor vying with him for Xiaotao's affections is a threat that constantly looms over him. The masculinity of Taisheng, already being challenged by the urban men, is injured by the refusal of Xiaotao. Hoping to regain his manhood, Taisheng has an affair with Miss Liao, a migrant entrepreneur from Wenzhou. More than a woman in whom he took solace, Miss Liao, structurally speaking, helps to cover up his wound, a symbol of the impotence that Xiaotao has inflicted upon him.

The experience of Xiaotao in the nightclub alters her perception of virginity. Hanging out with her girlfriends to sing karaoke one night, Xiaotao finds herself sitting with a group of urban businessmen. A self-proclaimed movie producer accosts her, soliciting a sexual relationship in exchange for a role in a film. Xiaotao runs away, disconcerted and humiliated by the sexual advances of the man. She has been able to reject the appeals of Taisheng for sex, but she could not resist the gaze of those men in the city treating her as a prostitute. Her virginity only seems to add to her value in such exchange. In this era when virginity has become a commodity, the last resort of Xiaotao is rendered meaningless.⁸ Young female migrant workers, as Tiantian Zheng discerns, are at once seen by urban dwellers as whores and virgins.⁹ This incident spurs Xiaotao to finally offer herself to Taisheng. After having sex, she pleads with Taisheng not to betray her for she no longer possesses anything of value. Sadly, Xiaotao soon discovers the affair of Taisheng with Miss Liao. The tragic romance further attests to the dilemma of Xiaotao between her tenacious pursuit of a meaningful identity and the impossibility to attain or keep self-value in reality.

To achieve a fulfilled personhood, her performance becomes the last means to which Xiaotao resorts. Devastated by the betrayal of Taisheng, Xiaotao goes to the basement room where she had stayed upon her arrival in Beijing. She shrouds herself with a plastic raincoat that she had used to deal with the humidity of the room. Xiaotao pretends to be a newcomer to Beijing through a self-deceptive performance. Her performance confuses the flow of time, bringing her back to the beginning, as if she has begun again from zero. Such action is a helpless attempt to restore the broken dream of selfhood.¹⁰



Fig. 10 Xiaotao re-enacts the scene where she sleeps wearing the raincoat on the night she just arrives in Beijing .

During her last show in the park, Xiaotao appears alone on stage in a white wedding dress, holding a wedding ceremony for herself in front of the visitors. This performance takes on a redemptive power for her lost virginity. Portentously, snowflakes fall in the midst of her performance. The “wedding” is thus overwhelmed by such a chilly ambience that one could mistake it for a funeral. Indeed, Xiaotao bids farewell to this world via this last performance.

Instead of empowering Xiaotao, her performance indicates a desperate self-negation. The impasse to an ideal selfhood in real life has caused Xiaotao to equate herself with the performed identity. Such a self-negation foreshadows her suicide that ensues afterwards.

The World is a film about pain; it opens with a wound and ends with death. When Taisheng responds to her invitation and comes to visit her, Xiaotao turns on the gas valve. The next scene of the film shows two corpses lying on the ground, surrounded by the warm-hearted neighbors who had saved them from the gas-filled room. Why did Xiaotao adopt such a radical way to life? The betrayal of Taisheng was certainly detrimental, but one cannot ignore her own profound frustrations in the city. The disillusionment about the possibility of assuming a modern identity struck her with a fatal blow.

In the film, the spell of death is not cast on Xiaotao alone. Niu, a male migrant performer in the park, has also attempted to set himself aflame. Insecure of the relationship with his girlfriend Qun, who also performs in the park, Niu becomes paranoid of Qun's whereabouts. When Qun becomes too tired of his own questions, he set himself aflame. Self-destruction registers his despair, and, perhaps, this is also the only way through which he could reclaim his male power. The film represents Er Guniang's death in a more tear-jerking fashion. Er Guniang (literally translated as "Second Girl"), a shy young man, finds employment in a construction project with the help of Taisheng. To earn the night differential, Er Guniang works overtime, resulting in his fall from the construction terrace. His death earns his parents nothing but three piles of banknotes.



Fig. 11 Er Guniang's father is given the compensation for his son's death.

One is obliged to ask: Why is the film haunted by the specter of death? What does the representation of death mean? Death is the metaphor that Jia Zhang utilizes to capture the tragic fate of the floating Chinese population. Their homes in the countryside are excluded from the modernization enterprise of the post-socialist era; hence, cannot foster a meaningful personhood. Leaving behind the countryside, however, they are denied the right for a modern identity in the city. The logic of the capitalistic development of China traps and devours the migrant workers, pushing them to a dead end. The film closes with a ghostly voice against a completely dark

screen. One hears Taisheng asking: “Are we dead?” Xiaotao replied “No, we’re just starting.” The viewers are left to ponder whether Xiaotao and Taisheng are still alive, and whether the voices are but from two ghosts. Nonetheless, it is clear that Xiaotao, or the specter of her, continues to yearn for a rebirth and a new beginning.

Conclusion

Unlike his previous films in which warmth remains evident against the backdrop of radical social changes and turmoil, Jia Zhangke’s *The World* is decidedly bleak, even cruel, in its representation of the experience of migrant workers in the urban milieu. Situating this study in the context of rapid urbanization of China in the Reform era, the paper follows two interwoven threads in its analysis. The first revolves around the significance of the World Park. The World Park is shown as a simulacrum that makes evident the paradox of fixity and mobility of migrant workers in the city. The actual fixity and exploitation of migrant workers is argued to be generated and sustained precisely by China’s adoption of the capitalistic development. However, the state, in its alliance with the middle class, effaces such social group from the cityscape. The second thread focuses on the individual experience of migrant workers in the city, centering on the metaphor of wounds and death, and arguing that migrant workers bear the traces and consequences of social changes in China. Historically, they are the wounded people who encounter an impasse on their journey to pursue modern selfhood. *The World* offers a thoughtful reflection on the issue of China’s floating population and the problem of the post-socialist development of China in general, particularly the growing rural-urban divide. The questions this film poses are yet to be seriously considered and dealt with.

Endnotes

¹ *Xiao Wu* and *Platform* are both set in Jia Zhangke’s hometown Fenyang, a county town in Shanxi Province. The story in *Unknown Pleasures* is situated in Datong, another medium-sized city in Shanxi. Jia’s hometown trilogy has never been screened in public in China due to its production outside the official system. *The World* is his first film working within China’s film production and distribution system. Michael Berry comments this trajectory as follow, “After nearly a decade of filmmaking in provincial China, it was ironically only with Jia’s microcosm of ‘the world’ that his cinematic vision could finally be projected in China” (Berry, 2005: 184).

² Li Zhang provides an ethnographic analysis of the migrant community Zhejiang Village in Beijing. Although her study shows the Wenzhou migrants’ active and, somewhat successful, pursuit of land use, security protection, and social service, it also indicates how much they are confined by their unregistered status due to the restrictions of the *hukou* system. (Zhang, 2001).

³ Scholars have noticed how industries use the construction and control of space to contain and exploit their migrant laborers. See Pun, 2007: 27-45, and Kelly, 2002: 395-441.

⁴ Regarding the discussion of realism in Jia Zhangke’s films, see Yingjin Zhang’s “My Camera

Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video," in *From Underground to Independent* (Pickowicz and Zhang, 2006: 23-46), and Jason McGrath's "The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic," in *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-first Century* (Zhang, 2007: 81-114). Following his incorporation of surrealism in *The World*, Jia Zhangke carried on such surrealistic elements in his subsequent film *Still Life*, which won the 2006 Golden Lion award at the 63rd Venice International Film Festival.

⁵ Xudong Zhang discusses Chinese state's altered role and strategy in ruling during Deng's regime and afterwards, especially the increasingly consolidated alliance that Chinese government has established with the middle class. See Zhang: 2008.

⁶ Refer to Chan & Buckingham, 2008: 582–606.

⁷ *The White-Haired Girl* is one of the most famous works of the communist propaganda since the 1950s. It has taken on such artistic forms as opera, ballet, film, and model play over time. Its story is a mixture of real life stories, local legends, and adaptations based on the communist ideology, depicting the misery suffered by local peasantry and the redeeming power of the Chinese Communist Party for their salvation. For a critical analysis of the genealogy of this story, please see Tang, 1993.

⁸ Perhaps it is owing to the commodification of virginity that hymen reconstruction surgery once became one of the most lucrative businesses a few years ago. In his recent novel *Brothers*, Yu Hua depicts, sarcastically, a virgin beauty contest, in which virginity becomes spectacle, fetish, and commodity in an utterly disturbing and absurd fashion.

⁹ Refer to Tiantian Zheng. "From Peasant Women to Bar Hostesses: Gender and Modernity in Post-Mao China," in *On the Move: Women and Rural-to-Urban Migration in Contemporary China*. (Zheng, 2004: 80-108).

¹⁰ Chris Berry discusses the cinematic representation of time in Jia Zhangke's film *Xiao Wu*, arguing that Jia foregrounds a time experienced differently by many from the progressive notion of time dominant in the post-socialist discourse of China. Refer to Christ Berry, "Xiao Wu, Watching Time Go By," in *Chinese Films in Focus II*. (Berry, 2008, 250-257).

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