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## Jia Zhangke Does Shanghai...And Other Notes from the Field

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July 21, 2010 in [Uncategorized](#) by [jwasserstrom](#) | [Permalink](#)

In addition to checking out the Expo (something I've blogged about [before](#) and will blog about again) and hosting a series of dialogs at M on the Bund's Glamour Bar (the last of which takes place this [Sunday at 2:30](#) and will find me in conversation about writing for the web and for print with Evan Osnos of the *New Yorker* magazine and the excellent "[Letter from China](#)" blog), I've been trying to take advantage of any opportunities that come along in terms of local cultural events. On the whole, I think I've been very lucky with my timing.

Sure, the weather has been terrible (no surprise for late June and July), with a long stretch of rain and then blistering heat, but some unusually interesting things have been going on. Highlights for me have included Abigail Washburn coming to town (the subject of an [earlier post](#)) and getting to tour a fascinating new museum in Xujiahui in the company of some of the local scholars involved in its creation and a lively, well-informed and eclectic group of academics and freelance writers (one of the former, Lisa Movius, wrote a great piece on the place, the site of an orphanage that played an important role in the development of the Shanghai art scene in the late 1800s and early 1900s, for the *Wall Street Journal*: to read it go [here](#)).

I did have one bit of bad luck, however, in the timing of a short trip out of Shanghai. This is because, while I was gone, the film-maker Jia Zhangke 贾樟柯 came through to take part in an event sponsored by the local [Foreign Correspondents Club](#), which included a screening of his latest movie ("I Wish I Knew" [*Shanghai chuan qi* 《上海传奇》], a film about Shanghai that is showing in local theaters and also at the Expo grounds in its UFO-like cultural center) and a Q and A session with the director. I wasn't there to hear him on July 14, though, as this year's Bastille Day (which used to be celebrated with a good deal of pomp and circumstance, incidentally, in the part of Shanghai where I'm staying, the former French Concession) found me in, of all places, a Daoist monastery atop a mountain in Zhejiang Province. I wouldn't have traded that monastery stay (part of a very memorable two-day group trip hosted by the [CET study-abroad program](#) that is sponsoring my time in China) for anything. Still, I would have loved to have been able to be hear what Jia had to say. Fortunately, I've just learned by checking out [Shanghaiist](#) that even those of us who couldn't be there can find out what Jia was asked and how he responded that night, as they've posted a recording of the proceedings.

As for Jia's film itself, I may have more to say at another time, as I've only seen part of it so far. For now, I just have two thoughts to pass on.

First, though it is tied to the Expo, one of the most attractive things about watching it after spending time at the fairgrounds is how it works against the grain of that event, which has been billed here as a sequel to the Olympics. What I mean is that it engages with parts of the local and national past that tend to be missing from the mega-event of the moment—and were missing from the high-tech Zhang Yimou-directed performance that opened the 2008 Games. This is clear from its very beginning. The film opens with a street-level reminiscence of 1960's childhood lane life in Shanghai (an individual-focused and human scale perspective that is the opposite of the approach taken in the Bird's Nest on 08/08/08) and how things changed when the Cultural Revolution took place (that's an event that was not alluded to at all in the Olympic spectacles and is not something you are reminded of in anything else I've seen with an Expo tie-in).

Second, while there have been many references in discussion of the film to how it fits in with other works in Jia's filmography, I've yet to come across anyone making what to this World's Fair-obsessed observer would seem a basic point. Namely, "I Wish I Knew" is in some ways much less of a World's Fair movie than one of his earlier productions. The World's Fair tradition, after all, [as I've noted before](#) and other scholars have stressed as well, is carried forward into the present not only by Expos but also by theme parks. Like Epcot Center...and like the Chinese variation on the genre that is the focus of "[The World](#)" (*Shijie* 《世界》), my favorite Jia Zhangke film.

In bringing this post toward a conclusion, I want to point those who have made it this far to two readings and one video that would be particularly appropriate to turn to when trying to put "I Wish I

Knew" into perspective. One of the two readings is Xu Jilin's smart and provocative look at Shanghai's past and present status as a hub of cultural activities (the author is one of the people whose reaction to Jia's latest film I'm most eager to learn), which appeared originally in Chinese and now is out in an English language version thanks to the good people at [China Heritage Quarterly](#). The other reading, which can help locate Jia's documentary-meet-fiction approach within a Chinese cinematic context, is past *China Beat* contributor Paola Voci's [essay](#) on the "quasi-documentary" genre (the author, by the way, has a [new book out](#) worth knowing about). The video to check out is [this one](#) that ran online to accompany a *New Yorker* profile of the director. Since that profile was written by Evan Osnos, it probably won't surprise anyone that one topic I'm likely to bring up when we share a stage on Sunday is Jia Zhangke, not just because of the local angle for a Shanghai event but also because the way that the magazine's website could use clips from the director's film to introduce him to foreign readers unfamiliar with his work stands out in my mind as a perfect illustration of the potential for symbiosis between the print and online versions of a single publication.

Finally, I want to note that before I get to talk to Evan about Jia and other matters, I've got a day trip to Suzhou on July 24 to speak at that city's [Bookworm Bookstore](#) . . . I was going to write that I hoped the Shanghai FCC would take pity on me and refrain from scheduling anything too interesting on that date, but then I remembered that whatever they do, there will be at least one interesting local event I'll miss when I head out of town this time: an [afternoon talk](#) at M on the Bund by David Henry Hwang and Leigh Silverman about their recent collaboration on a project called "Yellow Face" about Chinese American identity.

Too bad that, despite all the hype about futuristic technological breakthroughs that accompany this Expo, as they have accompanied all previous ones, there's still no machine that allows one to be in two places at the same time. I could have used that technology to good effect on July 14—and again this Saturday.