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In Search of Remembrance: Jia Zhangke’s *I Wish I Knew*

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By Ken Kwan Ming Hao

In his new film *I Wish I Knew*, a documentary on Shanghai, Jia Zhangke recreates once again, after a detour of sorts with *Useless* and *24 City*, that wonderful tension between the biographical and the historical, the primal impetus of his art, that had made *Platform, The World*, and *Still Life*, his best films, so memorable. Jia is different from all other well-known mainland Chinese directors, be they of the 5th or 6th generation — his is a singular sensibility that is aware of but not chained to the social-political, which to him are meaningful only to the extent that they are constraints to be transcended and transformed. In an environment of habitual politicization and cognitive rigidity, the sensibility espoused in Jia’s films is liberating.

Jia’s best films are insistently about the articulation of “space” amid seemingly insurmountable constraints. In these films, Jia strives to engender a state of serene dynamism in which the sublime is possible. The space that Jia aims for is interior, although the exterior is also incorporated in the articulation, reflecting a central element of Chinese aesthetics. The overwhelming politics in *Platform*, the naked material greed in *The World*, and the blatant hubris in *Still Life* are not simply scorned and despised; instead they are “dissipated” in the expanse of unencumbered imaginative flights. The flowing rhythm of the scene in *The World* in which the lady boss and the main male character contemporaneously step into a little slow dancing; the compact tension of the scene in *Platform* in which the protagonist unhesitatingly closes the door of the beat-up taxi van taking away his girlfriend for good; and the elegant fluidity of the scene in *Still Life* in which a teenage girl dreamily roller skates on a rooftop with the Yangtze River in the background are just a few examples of transcendence and transformation in Jia’s films.

The subject of his latest film is a city, Shanghai, of branded images, a stubborn case of monosemy (having a rigidly defined nature). Yet the Shanghai Jia represents on screen is polysemic (having multiple meanings that reflect different assumptions and perspectives) and nuanced, not monosemic and clichéd. It is a Shanghai seen from the vantage point of remembrance, not because of nostalgia but for perspective. Nabokov said in one of his novels, *Ada*, that “reality is always a form of memory, even at the moment of its perception.” Through the commentaries and recollections of a number of individuals whose lives have been profoundly shaped by Shanghai, Jia gives the city the depth and breadth it deserves.

As the English title of the film, *I Wish I Knew*, implies, Jia’s Shanghai is elusive and mercurial, yet tangible, symbolized by the angst-ridden flâneur character played by Zhao Tao. By opting for the
fluidity of remembrance, Jia not only connects present-day Shanghai with its past but also makes the city a much more dynamic trope for aesthetic articulation. There is a segment in I Wish I Knew on the Italian director Michelangelo Antonioni’s trip to China in 1972 at the height of the Cultural Revolution to make the film Chung Kuo — Cina. The Shanghai part of his filming was coordinated by a young cultural cadre of the city. In Jia’s film we see the cadre, now a much older man, in a traditional tea house near the Yu Yuan Garden recounting, with rich details and reflexive introspection, his interaction with the Italian director, as well as the relentless political struggle sessions that entailed at the same tea house. These struggle sessions resulted from the Chinese government’s “disappointment” and displeasure with Antonioni’s depiction of China — even though he had been invited by the Chinese government, Premier Zhou Enlai specifically, to make the documentary. Chung Kuo was shown for the first time in China only in 2004. In his filmic recounting of the event, Jia’s articulation is mainly on the interplay between the biographical (the cadre’s personal experiences), the political (the Cultural Revolution), and the spatial (the tea house), seamlessly switching between the present and the past.

What Jia has wrought here is a filmic manifestation of the aesthetics of Chinese calligraphy, where a fluid fusion of form and movement, reflective of the self, is of the essence. This is filmmaking at its most arresting, documentary or otherwise.

Beside Antonioni’s Chung Kuo — Cina, Jia incorporates numerous other films about Shanghai into I Wish I Knew.

For example, the singer/actress Pan Dihua appears in the documentary recounting her memories of Shanghai (her hometown) as well as in an excerpt from the Hong Kong director Wong Kar-wai’s Days of Being Wild (1990) playing an aging Shanghai socialite who has settled in Hong Kong. With the resemblance of Pan’s real life story to that of the character she plays in Wong’s film and her ruminations on Shanghai and Hong Kong, Jia creates a sumptuous tableau of temps perdu. The interweaving of the factual and the fictional makes for a multi-layered articulation — not only of remembrance, but also remembrance mediated, offering rich palettes of texture, tone, and affect.

Another film quoted by Jia is Fei Mu’s Spring in a Small Town (1948), one of the best Chinese films ever made. The film is epochal in its fusion of the personal and the historical, as well as the East and the West. The repressed emotional and sexual impulses of the main characters and the dying but irresistibly languid and romantic small town in a nation about to undergo unprecedentedly momentous change are all articulated in a language that is part literati poetry of Tang Dynasty and part Freudian unconscious. The female lead, played by Wei Wei (now residing in Hong Kong) recounts how Fei told her to help the then-inexperienced male lead feel more comfortable in his role by convincing him that she was really (off-screen) in love with him. It worked, but with unintended consequences — the young man was so smitten that he would not stop his pursuit even after the film shoot ended, resulting in her emigrating to Hong Kong just to be free of him. In telling this story, Jia intercuts between video of the actress remembering and sepia-toned black and white footage excerpted from Fei’s movie, fusing reality and artifice into something that falls magically in between.

Flowers of Shanghai (1998), a film adaptation by the Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien of the novel The Sing-Song Girls of Shanghai by Eileen Chang, is yet another film that Jia employs to construct his Shanghai. Hou is a master of muted yet consuming affect, which is indelibly demonstrated in the excerpt picked by Jia showing Tony Leung irrepressibly, though laconically, melancholic in the company of boisterous companions. In Hou’s film (and Hou himself, who appears in the documentary), Jia finds a voice, probably the most comfortable for him, to articulate his affective contemplation of Shanghai. This muted intensity is brought home in the chapter on the well-known playwright Yao Ke. One of his children, Wei Ran, is shown on screen sitting in a very unassuming chair on the empty stage of the splendid and historical Shanghai Lan Xin Theater. It is a highly dramatic setting and he is telling the almost melodramatic real-life story — featuring desperation, obsession, betrayal, suicide, and more — of his parents, yet the tone, including that of the raconteur, is matter-of-fact, though the impact is quite the contrary. One gets a very tactile feel of the people, times, and places being recounted, and somehow one also feels that without Shanghai all these dramas and melodramas would not have been.

The wealthy of Shanghai, present as well as past, are also portrayed in a matter-of-fact manner, but their identification with the city is unmistakable. A now elderly lady, Zhang Xinyi, a descendent of the
powerful Qing Dynasty official Zeng Guofan, reminisces about her husband’s courtship of her, succinctly recounting the Shanghai-tinged lineage, etiquette, and material accoutrements of her youth as if everything happened only yesterday. The son from a pre-liberation wealthy family recollects wistfully the clubbing life of his parents at such famous night spots as Paradise on Earth, and sings, full of pathos, a 1930s American pop song first heard on the imported family gramophone, with near perfect intonation of both melody and words. Even China’s first bond-trading millionaire, a member of the nouveau riche of Shanghai today, describes his path to riches in a way that portrays Shanghai itself as his partner.

Probably the most viscerally powerful chapter of the film is the one that tells the story of the martyred revolutionary hero Wang Xiaohu. We hear the story from Wang’s daughter, who was still unborn when he was killed in Shanghai and was only able to learn about her father’s heroism from other people’s accounts and written sources such as newspapers. Yet, we see her bring her father’s last days to life with words of etched sharpness. Hackneyed hagiography this is not. She describes her emotions when she was first shown newspaper photos of her father minutes before he had been executed, head held high smiling. Transfixed, one looks at those grainy photos on screen.

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