

KINO LORBER

presents

I WISH I KNEW

A film by Jia Zhangke

Official Selection, Un Certain Regard, Cannes Film Festival 2010

Official Selection, Locarno Film Festival 2010

Official Selection, Toronto International Film Festival, 2010

China / 2010 / 118 minutes / Color / Chinese with English subtitles

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Short Synopsis:

Shanghai, a fast-changing metropolis, a port city where people come and go. Eighteen people recall their lives in Shanghai. Their personal experiences, like eighteen chapters of a novel, builds a vivid picture of Shanghai life from the 1930s to 2010.

Long Synopsis:

Shanghai's past and present flow together in Jia Zhangke's poetic and poignant portrait of this fast-changing port city. Restoring censored images and filling in forgotten facts, Jia provides an alternative version of 20th century China's fraught history as reflected through life in the Yangtze city. He builds his narrative through a series of eighteen interviews with people from all walks of life-politicians' children, ex-soldiers, criminals, and artists (including Taiwanese master Hou Hsiao-hsien) -- while returning regularly to the image of his favorite lead actress, Zhao Tao, wandering through the Shanghai World Expo Park. (The film was commissioned by the World Expo, but is anything but a piece of straightforward civic boosterism.) A richly textured tapestry full of provocative juxtapositions. - *Metrograph*

Director's Biography:

Jia Zhangke was born in Fenyang, Shanxi, in 1970 and graduated from Beijing Film Academy. His debut feature *Xiao Wu* won prizes in Berlin, Vancouver and elsewhere. Since then, his films have routinely premiered in the major European festivals. *Still Life* won the Golden Lion in Venice in 2006, and *A Touch of Sin* won the Best Screenplay prize in Cannes in 2013. Several of his films have blurred the line between fiction and documentary. He has also produced films by many young directors and has made cameo appearances in films for other directors. In 2015, Jia Zhangke returned to Cannes to receive the Carrosse d'Or Prize (Golden Coach) and his subsequent features *Mountains May Depart* and *Ash Is Purest White* both were in Competition at Cannes.

Filmography

2018 - *Ash Is Purest White* - in Competition, 71st Cannes International Film Festival
2015 - *Mountains May Depart* -in Competition, 68th Cannes International Film Festival
2013 - *A Touch of Sin* - Best Screenplay, 66th Cannes International Film Festival
2010 - *I Wish I Knew* - Un Certain Regard, 63rd Cannes International Film Festival
2008 - *24 City* - In Competition, 61st Cannes International Film Festival
2007 - *Useless* - Venice Horizons Documentary Award, 64th Venice International Film Festival
2006 - *Still Life* - Golden Lion Award, 63rd Venice International Film Festival
2006 - *Dong* - Horizon, 63rd Venice International Film Festival
2004 - *The World* - In Competition, 61st Venice International Film Festival
2002 - *Unknown Pleasures* - In Competition, 55th Cannes International Film Festival
2001 - *In Public* - Grand Prix, 13th International Documentary Film Festival of Marseilles
2000 - *Platform* - In Competition, 57th Venice International Film Festival
1998 - *Xiao Wu* - Wolfgang Staudte Award & Netpac Award, 48th Berlin Int Film Festival

Currency | I Wish I Knew (Jia Zhangke. China)

By Tony Rayns

Full disclosure: I did the English subtitles for Jia Zhangke's new film, and may yet get paid for doing them. I wasn't in Cannes for the international premiere, but a magazine editor of my acquaintance tells me that "some smart people" who saw it there "think it's just a by-the-numbers commission piece." Telling me this was, of course, calculated to get my hackles up, to get me fighting back against blindness and ignorance. Happy to oblige.

First off, *I Wish I Knew* was indeed commissioned. So were Jia's other recent films *Dong* (2006), *Useless* (2007), and *24 City* (2008). But the word "commissioned" implies (a) that Jia has somehow "sold out," and (b) that the film is somehow inherently less credible as "art" than, say, *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*. I'm sure that most readers understand that almost all films are in some sense "commissioned" by those who finance them from those who make them, so let's spare ourselves any ruminations on the politics of film financing. In any event, the "smart" crowd clearly didn't grasp the implications of the film's opening shots of a branch of the Bank of Communications in Shanghai. A workman is seen polishing the guardian lions outside its door, and a noise like the roaring of a lion is heard on the soundtrack. Jia is acknowledging Shanghai's status as a city of commerce and burgeoning high finance, but maybe he's also doing what Godard did with those shots of cheques being signed at the start of *Tout va bien* (1972). Like every other small, independent production company in the world, Jia's XStream Pictures has unending cash-flow problems. He solves them pragmatically—but always on his own terms, no one else's.

In this particular case, Jia was invited to make a film "about Shanghai" to mark the opening of the Shanghai World Expo in late April 2010. Since he was given *carte blanche* to make whatever kind of film he liked, he accepted. To preempt future "political" problems, he made it clear to the financiers that his idea was to focus mainly on émigrés from Shanghai—politicians, soldiers, artists, gangsters—and to follow some of those émigrés to their subsequent bolt-holes in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The financiers didn't demur. Does it need to be explained that Jia needed special permission to film in Taiwan—not from the financiers in Shanghai, but from the famously enlightened government in Beijing? And is it hard for non-Chinese to grasp that Jia's choice of interview subjects—including one major criminal and others deemed "anti-communist"—was inherently going to be "challenging" for the Film Bureau?

These questions broach the problematic faced by Jia and all other serious Mainland Chinese directors of his generation, like Chen Kaige and Hou Hsiao-hsien before them. Any Chinese filmmaker with a modicum of intelligence and taste will sooner or later want to explore China's particularly fraught modern history: the anti-Japanese war, the civil war, the exactly parallel ideological projects of the communists and the KMT nationalists and both parties' rapid slides towards extremism and corruption, the ten-year calamity of the Cultural Revolution, the unbridled gallop into state capitalism. There's an underlying assumption that it's useful to examine the past to

understand the frequently wretched circumstances of the present and their effect on the behaviour and thinking of Chinese people.

The trouble is, even “smart” people in Western countries know next to nothing about China’s modern history, and apparently lack the empathy to understand what it’s like to live in the space between authoritarian government and out-of-control profiteering. This wouldn’t matter a toss, of course, except that serious-minded Chinese filmmakers need a global audience to survive. There’s no state support for the “art” sector in Mainland cinema (both Taiwan and Hong Kong do now offer modest subsidies to selected filmmakers), and the all-powerful market with its new 18-screen multiplexes has no time for “art.” Worse, despite pressure, China still hasn’t introduced a proper ratings system—the thinking seems to be that all films should be “suitable” for all ages—while political and military censorship processes continue to exert a strong grip. Hence the need that Jia and his contemporaries have for distribution abroad. That’s getting harder to find, and less lucrative—as even the likes of Zhang Yimou have discovered. No Chinese filmmaker has been more thoughtful or adventurous in battling all these adversities than Jia Zhangke. Accepting commissions, as long as they allow him a completely free hand, is one of the main planks of his creative survival strategy. You’d think “smart” people would get it.

Let’s open a parenthesis for a moment to consider the sad case of Chen Kaige. In 1988 Chen took his best film, *King of the Children*, to Cannes. He came away not only without a prize but also dumbfounded to discover that the huge majority of Western viewers knew nothing about the Cultural Revolution (and so weren’t able to supply the off-screen realities the film took as given) and had absolutely no sense of either the burden of China’s traditional culture or the imperative in the late ‘60s to follow a strict Maoist line. Since then, Chen has struggled in film after film to find ways of dealing with Chinese issues that will be intelligible to foreigners. He tried mythic abstraction (*Life on a String*, 1991), sexualized melodrama (*Farewell My Concubine*, 1993; *Temptress Moon*, 1996) and historical spectacle (*The Emperor and the Assassin*, 1998) before abjectly surrendering to Mammon with riffs on *Billy Elliot* (*Together*, 2002) and *Lord of the Rings* (*The Promise*, 2005). (He’s also struggled to overcome his inhibitions about dealing with sex, but that’s another story.) This sorry tale is just one of the many negative examples that Jia Zhangke has before him when he considers how to go on producing credible and innovative cinema in China. Close parenthesis.

So what did Jia make of his invitation to “deal with” Shanghai? *I Wish I Knew* is a long and complex film, and as its title suggests—like most of Jia’s films, the title is quoted from a song—it’s primarily concerned with knowledge. This is only one of several distinct agendas; others include continuing to reclaim the eloquence of spoken (and sung) language—a project begun in *24 City*—and championing cinephilia as a legitimate 21st century passion. (The Chinese title, incidentally, testifies to Jia’s own cinephilia: it echoes the Chinese title of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Flowers of Shanghai* [1998] by switching the syllables of “Shanghai” to produce “Hai Shang.” Hou’s title *Hai Shang Hua* means “Flower on the Sea” and Jia’s means “Legend on the Sea.”) But the acquisition of knowledge is the main thing.

Jia sidesteps the period of Japanese occupation, since that was when communists and nationalists were sort-of unified against a common enemy. (For the record, Shanghai fell to the Japanese in 1937. The “orphan island” period followed, with the autonomous “foreign concessions” allowed to continue functioning, until Pearl Harbour brought the Allies into the war against Japan in 1941. Further reading: J.G. Ballard’s *Empire of the Sun*, or any decent history of modern China.) Instead, Jia zeroes in on the civil war of the late ‘40s—or, more exactly, its aftermath, when Shanghai was “liberated” by the communist army and the upper echelons of the KMT used the port as their embarkation point for sanctuary in Taiwan. Wang Peimin describes what she knows of the summary

trial and execution of her father, trade unionist Wang Xiaohe, which occurred three weeks before she was born in 1948. In Taiwan, Lee Chia-tung describes how his father (a man of great probity) was assigned to administer properties that had been seized by the Japanese during the war—and how those properties were looted when the KMT evacuation to Taiwan began. Also in Taiwan, Chang Ling-yun recalls his time as a KMT soldier in Shanghai in the late '40s (he could have been one of the men who executed Wang Xiaohe) and describes how the “taxi-dancer” system worked in the city’s nightclubs and entertainment palaces.

Film clips similarly juxtapose opposite perspectives. A triumphalist clip from Wang Bing’s propaganda warhorse *Battle of Shanghai* (1959; it was one of the prestige projects made to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the People’s Republic), full of pompous visual and verbal rhetoric, is followed by a clip from Wang Tung’s *Red Persimmon* (1996), an autobiographical reminiscence of boarding a boat in Shanghai to flee to Taiwan. In interview, Wang Tung (a.k.a. Wang Toon) regrets the way the civil war forced his father Wang Zhonglian to fight against communist generals who had been his classmates in the Huangpu Military Academy. It must go without saying that these Taiwanese voices have never been heard in Mainland China before, but it’s equally true that no film made anywhere has previously attempted a pan-Chinese view of the fall-out from the conflicts in China’s civil war.

There’d be no problem filling the rest of this issue with more examples of the “knowledge” the film explores, but it would probably be more useful to use the remaining space to flag some of film’s running themes and concerns. One is Shanghai’s particularly cosmopolitan approach to the manners and morals of courtship. (A caption explains how internal migrations in the late Qing Dynasty, provoked by the Taiping Rebellion, turned Shanghai into China’s only truly multiethnic city.) Taking another cue from its title song, *I Wish I Knew* offers a suite of love stories, from Hou Hsiao-hsien’s explanation of what drew him to *Flowers of Shanghai* (he was charmed by the courtship rituals of the flower houses) to Chang Hsin-I’s disarming account of how she met and married her American-educated husband. The most piercing of these is Wei Ran’s overwhelmingly moving chronicle of the lives of his much-married mother (the actress Shangguan Yunzhu, star of *Two Stage Sisters* [1965] and many other films, driven to suicide in the Cultural Revolution) and his half-sister, the latter killed in a traffic accident after traumatizing affairs with two young men. This strand is rather beautifully resolved in the film’s coda, in which Jia’s muse Zhao Tao—playing an “invisible” silent witness to the city’s current project to erase most traces of its own past—sees an old man eating alone in his decrepit apartment and admires his framed photo of a woman (wife? daughter?) who is no longer in his life.

The cinephile strand, which uses images of demolition from Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River* (2000) to counterpoint images of high-rise monstrosities in the same locations now and a snippet from Wong Kar-wai’s *Days of Being Wild* (1990) to introduce Rebecca Pan’s matchless worldly wisdom, climaxes in the spirited defense of Fei Mu, one of China’s greatest directors, long vilified by the Communist Party. This inevitably centres on his finest film, *Spring in a Small Town* (1948): the star Wei Wei recalls the bizarre circumstances that brought this masterpiece into existence, and the director’s daughter Barbara Fei reveals the political machinations that drove him to Hong Kong and quite likely caused his early death. The vindication of Fei Mu picks up where Stanley Kwan left off in his Ruan Lingyu biopic *Center Stage* (1992); interesting that the two strongest counterblasts against the official communist line on film history should both come from film directors. Incidentally, Jia cleverly heads off any accusations of preciousness in his cinephilia by cropping all the clips to fit his ‘Scope frame: the clips are subsumed into his own rhapsodic visual flow.

For all the glowing testimony of former “Model Worker” Huang Baomei, the Communist Party doesn’t come out of the film looking too good. Jia’s underlying attitude crystallizes in the choice of his final interviewee, Han Han. This personable young Shanghainese is not only a best-selling novelist and racing-car champion but also China’s most popular blogger, noted for his sardonic comments on the uselessness and lubricity of state officials. Jia Zhangke is no more a “by-the-numbers” guy than Han Han is. Amazing, really, that anyone thinks he could be. Only members of FIPRESCI could be that dumb.

Cast and Crew

Directed & Written by Jia Zhangke

Yindo Cao...Yuehong Xing (Archive Footage)
Hsin-i Chang...Herself (as Chang Hsin-I)
Danqing Chen...Himself
Mei-Ru Du...Herself (as Du Mei-Ru)
Ming-yi Fei...Herself (as Barbara Fei)
Han Han...Himself
Hsiao-Hsien Hou...Himself
Baomei Huang...Herself (as Huang Baomei)
Chia-Tung Lee...Himself (as Lee Chia-Tung)
Tony Chiu-Wai Leung...Himself (archive footage) (as Tony Chiu Wai Leung)
Wei Li...Himself (archive footage)
Giong Lim
Rebecca Pan...Herself
Yunzhu Shangguan...Shuihua Shang (archive footage)
Peimin Wang...Herself
Toon Wang...Himself (as Wang Toon)
Xiao-he Wang...Himself (archive footage)
Ran Wei...Himself (as Wei Ran)
Wei Wei...Herself
Fang Xie...Chunhua Zhu (archive footage)
Cai-gen Xu...Jin Shui (archive footage)
Huaiding Yang...Himself (as Yang Huaiding)
Xiao-fo Wang...Himself (as Yang Xiaofu)
Yuan-sun Zhang...Himself (as Zhang Yuansun)
Tao Zhao...Herself
Qiansheng Zhu...Himself (as Zhu Qiansheng)

Music by Giong Lim

Cinematography by Nelson Lik-wai Yu

Sound Department:

Chen Wei Hsu...Assistant Location Sound
Yuanyuan Liu...Re-Recording Mixer Assistant
Shiang-Chu Tang...Location Audio Mixer
Camera and Electrical Department:
Kubbie Tsoi...First Assistant Camera

About Kino Lorber

With a library of over 2,800 titles, Kino Lorber Inc. has been a leader in independent art house distribution for 35 years, releasing 30 films per year theatrically under its Kino Lorber, Kino Repertory and Alive Mind Cinema banners, garnering seven Academy Award® nominations in nine years, including documentary nominees *Fire at Sea* (2017) and *Of Fathers & Sons* (2019). In addition, the company brings over 350 titles yearly to the home entertainment and educational markets through physical and digital media releases. With an expanding family of distributed labels, Kino Lorber handles releases in ancillary media for Zeitgeist Films, Carlotta USA, Adopt Films, Raro Video, and others, placing physical titles through all wholesale, retail, and direct to consumer channels, as well as direct digital distribution through over 40 OTT services including all major TVOD and SVOD platforms. In 2019, the company launched a new streaming channel KinoNow.com which features over 600 titles from its Kino Lorber library.