

Jia Zhangke's *The World* Speaks for Coevalness

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Globalization brings free movement to people all over the world; it also brings cross-cultural exchange at its peak. Jia Zhangke's film, *The World* (2004), exemplifies the speedy development of postsocialist China within the context of global capitalism by a story happening in World Park in Beijing. Although the acceleration of economic development produces positive effects for Chinese Gross Domestic Product (GDP), it widens the gap between cities and small towns in the levels of income and life standard. Thus, an increasing population from small towns crowds into big cities, which eventually expands migrants' sense of displacement. Jia as a Sixth Generation filmmaker takes up the documentary practice as well as the use of Flash animation in *The World*. In Rey Chow's "Film as Ethnography," she argues that "the filmic transcriptions of Chinese modernity are processes of cultural translation" (154). Jia Zhangke's *The World* engages in the process of cultural translation through both transcription and transmission in light of Rey Chow's translation approach. Therefore, on the one hand, the film strikes the audiences with its indexicality of Chinese social reality; on the other hand, Jia's reassembling of historical realities brings up the problems of globalization and modernism in postsocialist China by his treatment of different spaces and the virtual world.

According to Chow, as Third World societies are always looked by Western audiences in a traditional anthropologic and ethnographic sense, it re-confirms the observer/observed binary between the West and Third World countries (150). Therefore, the ethnographic image is not as a form of representation, but an act of translation; by which it means that ethnographic images transcribe native cultures through an observer's eyes to its audiences. Rey Chow uses the term "translation" regarding how Chinese films translate its culture through this medium, rather than referring to "the movement of a written text in one language to another in a target language" (Steintrager 291). Translation at work in cinema has two different types: translation as

“inscription” and “transformation of tradition and change between media” (Chow 154). The first one means that film translates “ephemeral experience from a fragile medium of cultural memory to more durable medium” (Banning “Week 21”); it can be the memory of “a generation, a nation, and a culture” (Chow 154). As a culture is traditionally documented by written text, the second type of translation means that the culture is in the “process of transition” in films and the culture is transformed into new media which is dominated by image (Chow 154). While the “callousness and viciousness” of “tradition” is clearly seen on screen, Chinese audiences have double identities by the act of transmission: both “inheritors” and “foreigners to their culture (Chow 167). According to Chow, “tradition itself is nothing if it is not a transmission. How is tradition to be transmitted, to be passed on, if not through translation” (Chow 170; 155)? What she means is that no matter the translation of a culture is bad or not, tradition would be transmitted only when is it translated by film. As for Chinese audiences, they can decide whether they should pass on the tradition or not through the transmissibility. Reflecting on Jia Zhangke’s careful observation of China as a native informant as well as a drifter of the system, his films transcribe Chinese modernity by his mixed mode of realism, which he remarks, has arisen from the “surreal” condition of postsocialist China (Cheung 45).

*The World* thematically focuses on the physical mobility of migrants and low-level workers, and their mobility within the virtual world. Jia sets the story in World Park in Beijing, which constitutes miniature replicas of famous world sites, such as Eiffel Tower, Taj Mahal, and Twin Towers. Tao (played by Tao Zhao), the female protagonist, works as a dancer in the theme park; and her boyfriend Taisheng (played by Taisheng Chen) works as the head of the security guard team. They have very limited social mobility in Beijing as well because of the “Hukou” system, a government system of household registration. Beijing, the political and economic

center of China, is a place that countryside people long for staying. By situating the World Park in Beijing, it also signifies the rising condition of China in the wake of globalization. Jia's emphasis on working-class workers pinpoints "the discrepancies in the post-Mao adoption of market-based policies that have led to unprecedented levels of labors moving into cities" (Dillon 28)." Tao and Taisheng *migrate* to Beijing for better freedom and jobs, but in fact, they stay in the World Park which inherently signifies higher mobility. In the film, Tao circles the park by sightseeing train three times, in which this "faux international travel that characterizes her work" contrasts with her real-life mobility (Dillon 29). Tao's sense of displacement gradually become substantial when she *travels* by the sightseeing train within the park again and again, and it reaches the peak at the last time that she travels by it in the film. Interestingly, Tao's lines are almost the same ("Did Erxiao buy food?") in her first two trips on the train with a minor sense of lost on the second trip. Further, Tao's silence during her third time circling the park highlights her confined mobility, contrasting with the repetitive female voice guide which blatantly introduces the well-known world sites. The "faux international travel" makes Tao feel a sense of displacement because she is in a symbolic space that signifies the world; in effect, she is trapped in *a world* where she spends most of her time within this "114-acres" land in the capital of China (Dillon 29; Li 170).

The iconic world sites are only signs of being international but do not refer to their signifieds (historical and cultural meanings) at all. As Dillon suggests "the perpetual simulacrum of national icons reduced to consumable signs makes meaningless any independent specificities of local histories and institutions" (29), Tao's switch between characters from different nations also deprives the signifieds of the signifiers. Her harmless performance harmonizes the political relations between countries within the theme park because the signifiers of her costumes signify

nothing other than a clichéd representation of other cultures. The slogans of World Park, either “see the world without leaving Beijing” or “give us a day, we will give you the world,” implies the fact that the park is created for the ones who are unable to travel to see the genuine world sites. Accordingly, Dillon states that the “discrepancy” in opportunities to see the world is exemplified by instances in which “characters marvel at the authenticity of sites for which they have no real-life referent” (28). This phenomenon ironically points to the penetration of globalization in typical citizens’ lives; they know the world sites through different types of new media, such as television, cinema, and World Wide Web.

Jia also questions the rapid progress of modernity in China, accompanied by frequent demolition and construction in which little sister takes part. Since little sister is the representative of the largest group of migrant workers in China, which is commonly known as *nongmin gong* (labors from the countryside), the plot about little sister is the most familiar type of migrants to Chinese audiences. The character little sister has its specific referent in real life, which seems to correspond to Bazin’s notion of realism. Li states that “Bazin’s view of the cinematic image as an indexical sign is meant to maintain ‘some existential connection’ between a specific referent and the signifier” (176), by which director Jia depicts a character that is specific to this nation. His translation of Chinese reality in this plot complement the national cinema. Nearly the end of the film, little sister’s death implies the negative aspect of demolition and construction in contemporary Chinese society. Taisheng asks the reason why little sister works at night, his relative Sanlai says “because the salary is much higher at night.” This plot ultimately questions the ignorance of individual’s safety for faster progress of constructing the modern city. Cheung comments that Jia’s “creative and performative treatment of raw materials” is an act of “détournement” (54); in other words, director Jia uses the lived materials from Chinese society to

question the milieu in return. The construction site is a symbolic space of modernism. Therefore, little sister's death is an alert to audiences; it is also violent to the Chinese audiences who has enjoyed the modernity that is constructed by a large number of migrant workers. The "cultural violence" is made evident by the act of translation, in which the social reality beneath the shocking individual story makes Chinese spectators feel painful on the one hand; on the other hand, they as foreigners to the image experience as a "passing-on" (Chow 167). Although they question about the *truth* of the image, transmission allows their acceptance or denial, which is the meaning of transmissibility indeed. Since "transmissibility and accessibility are what give a work its afterlife" (Chow 168), The film is made accessible to both local and global audiences through the film's reflection on the conflict between modernity and the problems that are left from the post-Mao era.

As the essay argues above, *The World's* translation of Chinese modernity is not only specific to Chinese culture but many other cultures because "the fluidity of the co-presence of cultures signifies the thorough 'contamination' of the world" (166). The influence of mass media makes different cultures more alike, especially the virtual world. Therefore, Rey Chow brings up a notion "coevalness of culture" by Johannes Fabian to describe that the mass culture of our media has affected both non-Western societies as to Western ones (164). In *The World*, telecommunication is coeval in all cultures. Accordingly, director Jia uses animation to approximates the new media phenomenon. Namely, Jia's translation is not only local but also global. Finally, Dillon argues that *The World* is a film "whose aesthetic grammar and visual tropes similarly speak to both an indigenous lineage and an internationalized style that neatly exemplifies the difficulty in supplanting such categorizations of the 'national' unto such works" (Dillon 32). Flash animation takes an important part of the film to lift out the localities of Tao

and Taisheng. Director Jia's idea to use Flash animation originates from his "investigation" of the phenomenon that people in China much rely on cell phones (Shih 56). Nowadays, cell phones and internet are part of people's lives; but back to the year that this film was made, Jia's observation on the contemporary phenomenon was translated by his use of emerging online visual form in China at that time.

The relationship between Tao and Taisheng reveal the importance of telecommunication in people's lives. On the one hand, the cell phone can be a symbol as limiting one's mobility in this film. In a scene of Tao escaping from the hotel, Taisheng sends her a message, saying "how far can you go?" It pathetically suggests that Tao's restricted mobility in the city; moreover, it also suggests that Taisheng can *control* Tao's mobility through the immediate telecommunication. On the other hand, the cell phone suggests the accessibility to borderless information. In other words, they have free mobility in the virtual world. When Tao returns to the park, Taisheng says to her, "I will take you for a walk." Ironically, Taisheng takes Tao to a photo studio and have a virtual world tour on a flying carpet, in which the background is digitally composed. From their conversation to the photo studio, Director Jia only uses one take with camera panning through the location. In this long take, Jia arranges two pairs of contrast to present the seemingly free virtual mobility within the condition of confined physical movement that Jia penetrates a sense of displacement. At one moment, a large photo of two young people riding the magic carpet and floating upon Tiananmen Square is on the left side of the frame; on the right side, the photo studio reveals the actual setting of it (a banal carpet and blue screen). The photo suggests people's fantasy about free mobility, and the shooting scene shows the composition of the faux journey. As the camera keeps panning, a television on the right immediately illustrates the digitally composed video of Tao and Taisheng's magic carpet ride,

accompanied by their shooting scene on the left. Through Jia's use of long takes and stable camera movements, the film looks like a direct record of people's everyday life rather than fictional, though the film is a mixed mode of realism and fiction. Hence, it is what Rey Chow calls the transcription of the memory of a generation.

Flash animation also serves as the transition shot from one place and other. While the sense of place is lifted out by the telecommunication and is visualized as animation in *The World*, the animation implies the "time-space compression" (Cheung 45). For instance, Taisheng patrols around the theme park with a horse one night, he receives a message from Qun, saying "drop by when you can." An animation shot follows that scene, which shows Taisheng riding a horse with floral floating around and he just arrives Qun's place. Spectators have no idea about the time because Taisheng's locality is immediately lifted out by the animation. Further, time in the virtual world seems to be different than that of reality, the animation then expresses the compression of time. When Tao and Taisheng look at the text messages on their cell phones, the animation replaces their physical locality. Moreover, the animation takes up a significant role to express character's emotions, accompanied by melancholy songs. It can be suggested, then, people get used to expressing their true emotion through virtuality rather than through real life.

In conclusion, *The World* is the cultural translation of China in the intersection of neoliberalism and postsocialism. It translates the phenomenon of time-space compression on screen as well as the resulting sense of displacement and nostalgia through the stage of World Park. In the film, as the city gradually suppresses the mobility of these migrants and lower-class workers in both physical and social aspects, the more they rely on the infinitely wide virtual world. Nevertheless, it is not a phenomenon that is specific to China; it is an international phenomenon. The "coevalness of culture" allows the new media penetrate people's lives in a



similar way (Chow 164). Ultimately, the national model is not capable of characterizing Jia Zhangke's *The World*; the transmissibility of his translation of Chinese modernity allows the film expands to be a universal model.

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## Filmography

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