

RESEARCH OF NOTE

Popular Music in Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures*

Jie Zhang
Trinity University

With his documentary-style films reflecting upon China's unprecedented transformation from a state-controlled to a market-driven economy, Jia Zhangke has risen from within the movement of independent Chinese cinema that began to flourish in the late 1990s to become one of the most recognized filmmakers of contemporary China.¹ Born in 1970 and raised in the underdeveloped Shanxi Province, Jia studied film theory at Beijing Film Academy and was first noticed for his controversial "Hometown Trilogy"—*Pickpocket* (*Xiao Wu*, 1997), *Platform* (*Zhantai*, 1999), and *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiao yao*, 2002).² These three films, shot with handheld video camera on the streets of his hometown province, focus on the reckless changes that China's aggressive economic growth and globalization have brought to socially marginalized groups. Like other independently made films—films that are produced with capital from outside the state-sponsored avenues and without the approval of film censorship, and that are not allowed to be shown in China's public theaters—Jia's first three films reach domestic audiences only through unofficial DVD copies and small-scaled screenings at universities, film bars, and art salons.³ His limited domestic influence sharply contrasts with the critical acclaim that he receives from international film festival audiences, who are searching for alternative film culture from China after the Fifth Generation directors. By the late

1990s, Jia had become a spokesperson for an ever-increasing group of aspiring Chinese independent filmmakers, particularly through writings and interviews that theorize independent Chinese cinema's practice.⁴

Jia believes that films should critically and honestly capture China's ongoing changes rather than succumb to the state's authority and commercialism. Positioning himself as a "director from the bottom of the society," Jia further seeks to show that everyone, and particularly "the silent majority," should have access to cinematic representation. His films have centered on the lives of social outcasts, such as pickpockets, prostitutes, and migrant workers. With the release of his fourth film, *The World (Shijie)*, in China in 2004, Jia has over time become an "aboveground" director, even though he continues to assert the importance of keeping his works out of mainstream cinema. In 2006, he released his *Still Life (Sanxia haoren)*, a film set in one of China's ancient towns that is being demolished for the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, around the same time when Zhang Yimou released his much-publicized mega production *The Curse of the Golden Flower (Mancheng jin dai huangjinjia)*. Jia's specific purpose in choosing this time for the release of his film was to break the dominance of mega-production (*shangye dapian*) over Chinese theaters and raise public awareness about alternative approaches and styles of filmmaking.⁵ In his more recent film *24 City (Er shi si cheng ji)*, Jia focuses on the trajectories of individual lives previously constrained by state control and socialist mentality, and only further compromised by the recent marketization of state-owned factories. Jia's films have become a window into not only the new forces of Chinese cinema but also a drastically changed contemporary Chinese society.

Jia's films have been the subject of some scholarly endeavors and have also been increasingly referred to in college classrooms as works representative of post-socialist Chinese cinema. Much critical attention has been directed toward his identity politics and professed cinematic malcontent, focusing on how he and other independent filmmakers negotiate with

the censorship of the state authority, the expectations of the international audience, and the established cinematic conventions, shaping an alternative Chinese film culture that could not have been possible 20 years ago.⁶ While Jia's emphasis on the local culture through his dialect-speaking characters has been examined in other studies, critics have recently also begun to investigate the transnational aspects of his filmmaking as a many of his films involve international capital and references to foreign cultures.⁷ However, Jia's distinctive use of sound, such as ambient noise, silence, and music, has seldom been the focus of existing studies.⁸ The need to study his use of popular music is particularly significant when we consider that two of his six full-length films are named after pre-circulated popular songs (*Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures*) and virtually each and every one of his films is comprised of significant musical elements. While this critical negligence can be explained by the fact that film is still largely considered an art of image rather than of sound, it can also be attributed to Jia's use of pre-existing popular songs, which gives the impression that his use of music is not original and creative.

Through this article I would like to challenge this particular assumption and I aim to argue that Jia's use of popular music in particular constitutes an important part of his cinematic creativity. If ambient noise and temporal intervals mark his distinctive "realist" approach, popular music is then the most obviously constructed element of his films, in that oftentimes when Jia's characters sing a song, the scenes begin to counteract his use of hallmark minimal drama. It is, however, important to consider what has made Jia use popular music so often, even if there is a risk of contradicting his "realist" approach. On a different note, pedagogically, to young audiences like American college students, popular music may well be the most approachable aspect of Jia's slow-paced, thrill-lacking, minimalist dramatic films, as the appeal of popular culture can transcend language and cultural barriers. Therefore, both a research gap and a pedagogical need call for an investigation of how Jia uses popular music to build characters and plots,

articulate themes of his films, and promote an understanding of his theory that films should function to memorize the experience of commoners going through China's unprecedented economic growth and the social changes that it has caused. While referring to all six of Jia's films, this article particularly looks at the use of popular music in *Unknown Pleasures*. In addition to being an important piece of social commentary, containing the stories of lost youths and clear references to Western culture, *Unknown Pleasures* is the film most likely to generate lively discussion in college classrooms and trigger further interest in Jia and independent Chinese cinema.

Set in China's industrial coal mining city, Datong, and its noisy and dusty public places, *Unknown Pleasures* portrays the spiritual malaise of China's urban youth when they encounter the market economy and globalization. The film is named after the theme song of a 1998 TV series, which is sung by the popular actor and singer Richie Ren. The song became a top hit of the year because it struck the hearts of those aspiring for individual success and longing for intrepidity against all odds, which is illustrated through the uplifting lyrics:

A hero unashamed of his humble origins, many are my ambitions [...] whenever sorrows come, whenever regrets come, as long as there is someone who understands my love; whatever suffering comes, whatever weariness comes, I'll follow the wind and roam carefree...

The concept of "roaming carefree" (or *xiaoyao* in Chinese) dates back to the writings of ancient Chinese philosopher Zhuang Zi around the fourth century B.C., and originally is registered with the Daoist idea of spontaneous accord with the nature. In the context of the song and the film, *xiaoyao* should be interpreted as free, at ease, without burden, and with much excitement, however momentary this state may last. As Qiao Qiao, the female dancer whom Xiao Ji falls for in the film, explains, "we should do what feels good."⁹

The popular song helps Jia build the two protagonists of the film, Binbin and Xiao Ji, and mark their dilemma and disorientation in experiencing a fast changing world. Without a job, an education, or any prospect and interest in the future, 19-year old Binbin must also deal with his mother's despair after she loses her long-time job in a textile mill and finds the government has restricted the practice of Falungong, a system of beliefs and practices that she adheres to. When asked by his mother to join the army in order to making a living, Binbin learns through the required physical screening that he suffers from hepatitis, which only adds to his dismay. Shy and reticent, Binbin occasionally sells pirated DVDs, but mostly hangs out with his equally aimless yet more restless friend Xiao Ji, who later convinces him to take part in an attempt to rob a bank with a fake bomb, for the mere sake of momentary excitement and the fantasy of being carefree. The only times when Binbin breaks his vocal silence in the film are when he sings the song "Unknown Pleasures." The first time he sings with his girlfriend who will soon leave for college in a karaoke room that they frequent, and the second time he sings upon the request of a policeman when detained for the attempted bank robbery.

It is significant that both times Jia edits the film in such a way that it allows Binbin to sing the song in its entirety, which is characteristic of the singing scenes in many of Jia's films. Popular songs, in Jia's view, not only mark the often short lengths of time in which they were popular and therefore index people's memory of fleeting past years, but are also the only opportunity for self-expression for a socially marginalized people who otherwise have difficulty articulating for themselves. Just like Binbin, the pickpocket Xiao Wu in *Pickpocket*, the anonymous teen boy of the demolished town in *Still Life*, and the laid-off workers in *24 City* sing songs, either alone or as a group, in order to express their ambition, passion, nostalgia, fantasy, or frustration. Devoting screen times to allow for singing the songs in their entirety is Jia's way of forcing attention upon these socially and discursively underprivileged people and their unheard cries for hope and a decent life. For Jia this is both an ethical

and political issue that must be addressed in order to make his films an honest and complete representation of contemporary Chinese society.

Jia is deliberately challenging cinematic conventions when he forces the representation of his characters to be taciturn with only occasional singing that seems to be out of place and inconsistent

with the pace and style of the film, particularly given that a reserved character's singing a song in its full length can disrupt the nar-



rative and make *Workers of the to-be-demolished 420 Factory* singing the story appear “*L’International*” (in Chinese) in *24 City*

unconvincing, in addition to the fact that there is certain superficiality in one’s singing whatever other people are singing. However, Jia forges ways to make these vocalizations not only thematically relevant, but also emotionally touching. The voices of the characters are far from elegant or sophisticated, but because audiences are given extended time to approach their feelings and emotions with the familiar songs as bridges, audiences gradually begin to enter the characters’ minds and think sympathetically of them. When Binbin holds his girlfriend’s hand to tap mechanically with the rhythm of the MTV and the couple actually begin to sing together in the dark karaoke room—“A hero unashamed of his humble origin...”—we sense their determination to be optimistic despite all the problems that they cannot resolve. Highlighted by the knowledge that while she is climbing the ladder of success through attempting to enter college, he already knows he is stuck and is aware that they are beginning their journeys down separate paths, and their relationship cannot last much longer. While they sit parallel to each other, both facing the TV, and without eye contact, there is a



Binbin and his girlfriend singing “Unknown Pleasures” together in *Unknown Pleasures*

certain sense of sadness in the way in which they sing this largely heroic song, as they are shouldering the “lightness of being” that seems to declare any efforts of change

will be made in vain.

The singing scenes in *Pickpocket* and *Still Life* also have the same effects upon the viewer. When the dominantly reserved Xiao Wu starts singing “Heart Rain” (*Xin yǔ*) in an empty public bathhouse, fully naked and in an unconfident voice, we see a shy, lovelorn and tender boy’s heart embedded in the unappealing body of a morally flawed pickpocket. When he sings the same song to Mei Mei when she is sick, we sense his timid expression of love but simultaneously become aware of her impending disappearance, as this is foreshadowed in the lyrics of the song “because tomorrow I will become the bride of another man...” Similarly, in *Still Life*, an unknown, half-naked adolescent boy sings “Mouse Loves Grains” (*Laoshu ai dami*) one of the most popular songs of the year, while standing upon the piled wreckage of a half-demolished building in which the demolition crew takes a break while other workers spread sanitizing mist around the area.



The camera pans to show Han Sanming standing against the wall of the building, as the boy’s only audience, and in a momentary contemplative mood. Han, An unnamed boy singing “Mouse Loves Grains” in *Still Life*

the film's protagonist, has come to Sichuan to look for the woman who was abducted, sold to him as a wife in Shanxi, only to be rescued and sent back to her home with their daughter sixteen years before. Facing a town that will be flooded for the construction of a dam, the uncommunicative miner has only the faintest hope of finding his wife, but somehow the unknown boy's singing helps him come to terms with love, which in any audience's opinion, is the last emotion that can be involved in a relationship based on human trafficking:

Even if just for one day, make all my dreams come true, with all my heart and soul, I'll always be true to you. Whatever it takes, my dream will come true. I'll whisper in your ear, my vow. I love you, only you, like a mouse loves grain. I'll stay by your side. I'll be there no matter what.

This moment of sentimentality helps further Han's character development and marks the birth of love and hope from within the least likely circumstances as an underlining thread of the film. To Jia, this kind of determination to retain hope when one faces despair constitutes the most admirable part of the mentality of the socially marginalized Chinese people and is actually the backbone of his country as it goes through economic reform and social instability.

However, Jia never intends to suggest that popular music can be a redemptive force for hardship in reality. The ironic ending of *Unknown Pleasures* purposefully deflates this illusion and further suggests that even this humble expression of feelings can be appropriated and teased by political authority. Binbin, handcuffed and standing against a wall and a closed door of the police office, is ordered to sing a song he knows well to entertain the policeman, who has apparently become bored by the hyperbolically official TV newscast about the opening of a highway that connects their city and Beijing. It is ironic that Binbin, now legally liable and physically restricted, begins to sing "Unknown Pleasures," the very song that cries for a

carefree life unburdened and unconstrained by anything. It is also tragic that Binbin's singing, an expression of his ambition, now



only serves to entertain the authoritative power,

Binbin singing "Unknown Pleasures" in a police station at the end of Unknown Pleasures

as symbolized by the policeman who holds him for the attempted bank robbery. Once his singing becomes a device to entertain others, it is taken away from him and becomes irrelevant to him. Binbin has therefore not only lost freedom but is here deprived of the last form of expression that he can hope to resort to. His being cornered in the police office is here both mimetic and symbolic, showing how he has been fixed into a position of inferiority and silence.

Unlike Binbin's reservation and disinterest, Xiao Ji is passionate and even impulsive, but he also lacks a goal in life and ends up being driven into various transgressions by the sole motivation of devoting his energy to a cause bigger than himself, even if it is a wrong cause, so that he can forget about his own problems and avoid falling into ultimate hopelessness. Xiao Ji admires the legendary Monkey King because "he is free as the wind," which directly relates to the carefree lifestyle as cried out in "Unknown Pleasures." Xiao Ji looks like an underdeveloped adolescent boy, but that does not prevent him from launching into the desperate attempt to woo Qiao Qiao, a dancer whose boyfriend Qiao San is a member of the powerful mafia. It seems that his romantic rivalry with a powerful man (or a possible father figure), which results in violent beatings and public humiliations, helps fill Xiao Ji's otherwise empty ego, grants him some "unknown pleasures," and makes him feel personal significance. Even this misguided illusion cannot last long as Qiao San dies overnight, not by Xiao Ji's hands but

rather through some random accident. When Xiao Ji finally has a chance to go to a hotel room with Qiao Qiao, there is a sense of confusion rather than triumph on his part, which makes the romantic moment awkward. The ego that Xiao Ji works so hard to build is deflated not only because the source from which it draws life has disappeared, but is also reduced when he cannot manage to open the faucet of the shower, a thing too modern for a boy like him with such “humble origins.” The scene ends with Qiao Qiao using a bath towel to dry Xiao Ji’s hair and body, as if she is an older sister taking care of a vulnerable little brother. The masculinity that Xiao Ji works so hard to inflate is ultimately deflated by this newly emerged sister-brother relationship, which Qiao Qiao stressed when they first met but Xiao Ji denied willfully.

Throughout the film, Xiao Ji constantly throws himself into frenzied search for excitement but always ends up finding himself out of the game. Xiao Ji and Binbin’s re-enactment of the robbery scene from the American film *Pulp Fiction* in real-life China is perhaps the most surreal plot element in this largely realistic film, marking the desperation of Xiao Ji to soak up someone else’s dream. *Pulp Fiction* is mentioned several times throughout the film, but it is through a club dance scene that Jia indicates Xiao Ji’s blurring of the boundary between fiction and life. Xiao Ji and Qiao Qiao dance together with the music sampled from the soundtrack of *Pulp Fiction*, but their enjoyment is interrupted by Qiao San and other mafiosos. They take Xiao Ji away from the dance pool and threaten him with the question “Are you having fun?” and when Xiao Ji answers “fun,” he is slapped on the face and the question is repeated; with every answer the same, he is consequently slapped at least ten different times. Receiving violence seems to redeem Xiao Ji’s feelings of emptiness, and violence becomes something necessary for him to reach a certain sense of fulfillment. When these confrontations disappear with Qiao San’s death, Xiao Ji has to find something else to pursue and channel his energy into.

Undoubtedly through Xiao Ji's character, the director aims to deliver critical commentary about contemporary Chinese society. Jia has written that living in today's China is close to a "surrealist" (*chao xianshi*) experience,¹⁰ with demolition ongoing everywhere; with the speeding up of everything from new construction to trains; with newscasters busily delivering news about China's rise while glossing over thorny issues; with people's "unknown" excitement about success and prosperity, yet tensions and resentment have never been so intense. *Unknown Pleasures* specifically mentions several pieces of breaking news from the year 2001, the year the film takes place, through diegetic TV and radio news reports: the self-burning of Falungong practitioners at Tiananmen, the Hainan Island incident with the United States, China's entry into the World Trade Organization, a sabotage in a factory residential building in north China, and China's successful bid to become the host city of the 2008 Summer Olympics. Compared with Xiao Ji and Binbin's uneventful life, the reality of the year 2001 seems more theatrical. Jia uses these theatrical events as a backdrop for Xiao Ji's search for excitement and drama to show how these events, despite the excitement they promise, are irrelevant to the actual experience of individuals living on the margins of the society.

Through a distinctive juxtaposition of news broadcasts (flooding the ears of the characters) and prolonged silence of the characters (with occasionally singing as analyzed), Jia intends to suggest how grand narratives about the rise of a modern nation no longer hold together a coherent collective identity for the Chinese people. The underprivileged people like Binbin and Xiao Ji are confused, angry, and are desperately searching for something to hold on to. In *Unknown Pleasures*, Xiao Ji's motorcycle breaks down many times in the middle of the road, leaving him to kick and curse the motorcycle, and feel hopeless about where he is going in life. The dysfunctional motorcycle, a symbol of modernization itself, is a metaphor that bears Jia's worrisome feelings about rapid economic development leaving many underprivileged Chinese behind. Toward the end of the film, while the policeman is watching news about the opening



A shot from *Unknown Pleasures* that highlights the irrelevance of official news to common people's real experiences.

of a new highway that promises prosperity and convenience, Xiao Ji's motto *o r c y c l e* breaks down again in the middle of the road, ironically

connoting how far the Chinese people can sustain the surrealistic speed of development without anger and resentment taking over. In this light, it is significant that the bank that Xiao Ji and Binbin attempt to rob is called "China's Construction Bank." They are so eager to play a role in China's ongoing construction project—understood in the broadest possible term—which has neglected them for so long, that they begin to become destructive elements.

In a way, *Unknown Pleasures* can also be read as Jia Zhangke's discursive deconstruction of China's grand modernization project, a position consistent with his self-conscious attempt to remain alternative and non-mainstream. Interestingly, but not surprisingly, Jia himself also appears briefly in *Unknown Pleasures*, as an unidentified minor character singing passionately "O Sole Mio" around the Textile Mill's residential complex where Binbin lives. We see Jia's character through the



The director, Jia Zhangke, singing "O Sole Mio" (In Italian) in *Unknown Pleasures*

eyes of Binbin who happens to pass by when he is singing: Jia's character is in a worn out, dull, typically Chinese white tank tee while singing in Italian and imitating Luciano Pavarotti's formal

presentation of the song. This scene serves as a possible means to understanding Jia's self-reflection and self-mockery, especially as a director who has gradually gained international recognition but who is still avoided by many Chinese domestic audiences. For Chinese audiences, who counter the pressure of living in a fast-changing society by taking escape in highly entertaining mega-productions, Jia's "realistic" works speak in an unfamiliar filmic language, just like Jia's character singing in a foreign language unfathomable to them. But Jia insists on embracing the alternative film culture to which he belongs and contributes, even if that means he can never become popular or mainstream in his home country. In *Unknown Pleasures*, when Binbin sells pirated DVDs, he has borrowed money from Xiao Wu, played by the same actor of *Pickpocket*, who suggests that Binbin should try to sell copies of *Pickpocket* as it has become so popular and profitable. This deliberate intertextuality can be seen as Jia Zhangke's self-teasing due to the fact that he knows very well that in reality even people like Xiao Wu would not like to watch *Pickpocket*. The burden of reality is already so prominent a topic and it takes tremendous courage, and economic cost as film tickets have become very expensive in China, to produce and watch a film like Jia's, and appreciate its representation of the many changes and challenges that common Chinese people face every day. Many people choose to be oblivious about the current issues within their society, but Jia sees it is a filmmaker's responsibility to try to remind people of the importance of not forgetting about these issues through their representation in his films, which capture a fleeting moment of the present before it disappears into the darkness of history.

Endnotes

- ¹One can learn about major issues related to Jia's films through reading Michael Berry's interview of Jia in English, "Jia Zhangke: Capturing a Transforming Reality," in Michael Berry, ed., *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 182-207.

- ²For complete scripts of these three films, together with early reviews and studies, see a series of three books in Chinese compiled by Lin Xudong, Zhang Yaxuan, and Gu Geng, *Jie Zhangke's Film: Xiao Wu, Jia Zhangke's Film: Platform, Jia Zhangke's Film: Unknown Pleasures* (Beijing: Zhongguo mangwen chubanshe, 2003). For an introduction to these three films in English, see Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke's "Hometown Trilogy": Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).
- ³For studies of independent Chinese cinema, see articles in Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, eds., *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006).
- ⁴See Jia Zhangke, "The Age of Amateur Cinema Will Return," *Nanfang zhoumo* 770 (November 13), 4, 1998; Jia's interview with Lin Xudong, "A Folk Director from China's Bottom Society: A Conversation," *Jintian* 3, 1999. Both are reprinted in *Jia Thoughts 1996-2008: Jia Zhangke's Film Notes* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2009), 32-35 and 45-70.
- ⁵In a speech after a screening of *Still Life* in Beijing in 2006, Jia stated that he would like to see how many audience still care about "good men" (*haoren*, as in the original Chinese title of *Still Life*) in this age of "gold"-worshipping, which is a direct reference to Zhang's film. In an interview with Xu Baike in 2007, Jia further criticized Zhang Yimou for monopolizing the resources of filmmaking, including capital and market, which should be made available to China's young directors. He also referred to mega-productions as "viruses" (*xijun*) that destroy social values through uncritically catering to mass entertainment. See *Jia Thoughts 1996-2008: Jia Zhangke's Film Notes* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2009), 186-202.
- ⁶Examples are Cui Shuqin's "Negotiating In-Between: On New-Generation Filmmaking and Jia Zhangke's Films," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18, 2 (Fall 2006), 98-130; Valerie Jaffee's "Bringing the World to the Nation: Jia Zhangke and the Legitimization of Chinese Underground Film," *Senses of Cinema* 32 (July-September 2004); and Zhang Hongbing's "Ruins and Grassroots: Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Discontents in the Age of Globalization," in Sheldon Lu and Jiayan Mi, eds., *Chinese Ecocinema: In the Age of Environmental Challenge*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2009), 129-153.

⁷For studies of dialects in Jia's films, see Jin Liu, "The Rhetoric of Local Languages as the Marginal: Chinese Underground and Independent Films by Jia Zhangke and Others," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18, 2 (Fall 2006), 163-205. For studies on transnational aspects of Jia's films, see Jason McGrath, "Independent Cinema: From Postsocialist Realism to Transnational Aesthetic," in Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008), 129-164; Michelle Bloom, "Transnational Chinese Cinema with a French Twist: Emily Tang Xiaobai's Conjugation and Jia Zhangke's *The World as Sinofrench Films*," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 21, 2 (Fall 2009), 198-245.

⁸Some studies mentioned Jia's use of music in passing, but have not studied this aspect of his films in the context of other audio features of Jia's films. Lu Tonglin's article "Music and Noise: Independent Film and Globalization," *The China Review* 3, 1 (Spring 2003), 57-76, focused on music and noise in *Pickpocket* and needs to be updated with discussions of Jia's later films from this perspective.

⁹In *Unknown Pleasures*, Qiao Qiao referred directly to Zhuang Zi's "Dreaming of Being a Butterfly" and "Unknown Pleasures" (Xiao yao you) in her conversation with Xiao Ji. Qiao Qiao also notably has a butterfly tattoo on the front of her left shoulder, indicating a desire to be carefree and to live without the burden of reality.

¹⁰Jia Zhangke, "Director's Words on *The World*," in *Jia Thoughts 1996-2008: Jia Zhangke's Film Notes* (Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2009), 146.