

The absence of a moral compass in contemporary China

Xiao Wu, a film by Jia Zhang Ke at the London Film Festival

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Xiao Wu is a film which captures vividly the emptiness of its characters' existence, which shows us their alienation. But it is not simply concerned with existential angst. It strongly conveys a sense of the devastation that Stalinism has wrought on China.

The story itself is very slender. Xiao Wu ('little Wu'), the central character of writer-director Jia Zhang Ke's debut film, is a provincial pickpocket. He has grown up a thief in Fenyang province where, the film suggests, there was little else for him or people like him. All of his acquaintances grew up as petty criminals too.

We follow Xiao Wu around Fenyang as he steals wallets. Unlike his friends who have given up thieving, Wu has remained a pickpocket. He throws away ID cards and operates with the cash that he steals. His is a cash-theft economy, but times have changed. The police advise Wu to 'learn a new trade'. All his former acquaintances have gotten more sophisticated, have become small 'businessmen'. His one-time best friend Xiao Yang has just been named a 'Model Entrepreneur' for his cigarette trafficking activities. Everyone is on the make. This is the real face of 'communism with Chinese characteristics'.

Xiao Yang has not invited Xiao Wu to his wedding. Wu represents the gutter from which Yang feels he has risen through his more sophisticated practices. When they were young penniless criminals together, Wu had promised to give Yang 3 kilograms of Yuan bills as a wedding present. Yang is above that now, and is embarrassed to be reminded of the naiveté of that lifestyle. The rejection of the money is not only a symbol of the distance Yang has travelled personally. When Wu explains about the promise, he points out that it was made in the days before 100 Yuan notes

were in circulation, when 10 Yuan was the highest denomination available.

Mei Mei, a karaoke bar hostess, offers Wu the only tenderness we see in the film. She too is trapped, singing for her customers. She lies on the telephone to her mother, saying that she is an actress in Beijing. When she invites Wu to sing with her he refuses sullenly. Slowly she breaks him down. He steals more and more wallets to buy her presents and gets angry when she is still working in the bar. He gets her a ring, but when he goes to see her she has moved out.

Xiao Wu's family are peasants, still working the land, who think he is a rebellious fool. He gives his mother the ring that he got for Mei Mei, and then erupts angrily when he sees it being worn by his brother's fiancée. His father chases him from the house. He looks at the crumbling and desiccated peasant landscape around him and returns to the bustle of the town and the certainties of his life of theft. Eventually the police clampdown catches up with him.

What appears to begin as a grainy glorification of petty 'honest' crime gradually emerges as a portrayal of that crime, not as some sort of romantic lawlessness, but as an outmoded form of business transaction. What Jia leaves us with is a simple and effective portrayal of the vacuum at the heart of contemporary Chinese society. The only future for Wu is to become a more efficient criminal. He ironically refers to himself as an artisan, earning his living by his hands, and says that this makes him 'still a dummy' without the brains for business.

From the outset we are aware that this is a society adrift, and we see some pointers to the reasons for this. On a bus travelling across the dusty countryside, Xiao

Wu fobs off a request for his fare by claiming to be a policeman. As soon as he is left unattended he picks the pocket of the passenger beside him. The manoeuvre is inter-cut with a portrait of Mao Zedong hanging from the driver's rear-view mirror. From the beginning we see Jia making a connection between the political situation and the personal situation.

Jia lays some of this imagery on very thickly, although it is still effective thanks to some fine and simple camera work from the Hong Kong filmmaker Yu Lik-Wai. It must also be said that the symbols he has chosen (a pack of Marlboro at the price of a carton of local cigarettes, a lighter that plays 'Für Elise' in a tinny mechanical tone) do ring true. Wu is eventually undone by the pager he bought so Mei Mei could keep in touch with him. It beeps as he is picking someone's pocket. When the police finally read the message to him it is only a weather forecast.

It is clear, then, that Jia sees no future in the technological trinkets that are the staples of the black market. Similarly, the television screens that form the basis of Mei Mei's karaoke singing are seen as attractive but vacuous. The only times we see televisions are in the karaoke bar and when the provincial station in Fenyang runs a series of interviews praising the police clampdown and denouncing the criminals. The only time we see the local reporter is when she is either conducting those interviews, or interviewing Xiao Yang on the eve of his wedding to convey the best wishes of the province. Jia is sceptical about both what Beijing is bringing for the Chinese people and the way it is presented by the media.

At the same time, he is aware that there is no going back. I do not know what future Jia envisages for China. It is possible that he sees no way out of the terrible situation in which the country now finds itself. The film, after all, is about the effectiveness of individualistic survival mechanisms. Jia certainly sees the corruption of the black market as spreading across the whole of society. Any sense that Wu can escape back to the land and to his parents evaporates after his father chases him away. The camera, from Wu's point of view, pans round and round a shattered rural landscape of horses, woodpiles, derelict buildings and dirt tracks, while on the soundtrack we hear Shanxi Radio welcoming the reunion of Hong Kong with China. The shot echoes the scene when Wu discovers

that Mei Mei has left and he spins round and round in her empty room.

The film is not without its moments of humour. When Wu tells one of Yang's lackeys that earning money from trafficking and exploitation is hardly clean, the message comes back, 'It's not trafficking, it's free trade. And the girls aren't being exploited, it's entertainment. That's all.' That a film about the lack of a moral centre to Chinese society manages moments of humour and is not unremittingly bleak is a testament both to Jia and to his entirely amateur cast, particularly Wang Hang Wei as Xiao Wu.

It is this low-key depiction of the absence of a moral compass that makes the film so effective. The police chief who arrests him accuses Wu of a lack of discipline and tells him to stand up straight. In turn Wu advises him against drinking too much. Xiao Wu is at the centre of the film but he is not glorified. It is made clear that he is touched by all of the economic problems that fester elsewhere. When he demands to see Mei Mei her boss asks him, 'Has she been sold to you? What's your relationship? You've only got dirty money.' This honesty about social problems is refreshing. When Wu stands publicly humiliated, handcuffed in the street and being stared at by a gathering crowd in a long final scene, we feel sympathy for him. As the final song on the soundtrack asks, 'Who is the hero?' Xiao Wu has simply been surviving, and the end of this possibility leaves not just Wu but also China at a cross-roads. Whatever limitations there might be in his vision of the future, Jia Zhang Ke's sensitive and acute representation of the current breaking down of social forms is worthy of praise and attention.



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