

2000 Toronto International Film Festival—Part 6

Independent filmmaking that is genuinely independent

Platform, written and directed by Jia Zhang-ke Yi Yi [A One and a Two], written and directed by Edward Yang

David Walsh
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Platform (*Zhantai*) was apparently a Chinese pop song in the 1980s. In an interview director Jia Zhang-ke explained that the song—whose title refers to a railway platform—contains the line, “We are waiting, our whole hearts are waiting, waiting forever...” He observed: “It’s because we’re still ‘waiting’ that I decided to name the film after the song.”

Jia is an independent Chinese filmmaker, who works without obtaining the approval of the Beijing regime. This is his second work, following the masterful *Xiao Wu* (1997), about a young pickpocket in a provincial town. The anatomy of melancholy 6 May 1999 and The absence of a moral compass in contemporary China 12 November 1998.

Platform considers the economic changes that occurred in China in the 1980s, the promotion of capitalist relations, and their social and personal consequences. It follows, over the course of three hours, the fate of a number of young people. They’re members at first of the Peasant Culture Group from Fenyang, obliged to perform the immortal “Train Heading for Shaoshan”—Shaoshan being Mao Zedong’s birthplace. A repressive atmosphere predominates. Wearing bell-bottoms is considered a sign of anti-social behavior. One youth is told, “You sound more like a capitalist roader.” He tells a girl her father is “like a KGB man.” Simplicity, poverty and naïveté: another girl asks, “Is it true that kissing makes you pregnant?”

In the spring of 1980 the leader of the performance group announces: “From now on, Western-style music will be included in our shows.” One thing leads to another. The government cuts its subsidies and the Peasant Culture Group transforms itself into the “All-Star Rock and Breakdown Electronic Band.” Allegiances and ties within the group loosen and even dissolve. In the end, a consumerist society has been produced. Bourgeois domesticity is now the norm.

The director is a rarity in that he criticizes the Mao era, without reducing people, including local party officials and others, to caricatures. He suggests that there were those who believed they were sacrificing to bring into being a new type of society. He criticizes the Deng Xiaoping era, without cynicism and without exhibiting the slightest nostalgia for the earlier period. He shows, however, that the majority of the population is “still waiting” for the benefits of “reform” promised them, and how painful and difficult that is. He leaves the audience free to draw its own conclusions about this history.

Jia works slowly and patiently, treating complex social and emotional problems with extraordinary confidence and pictorial skill. A conversation in a cramped bedroom or on the city’s battlements is allowed to take its

natural course. He has a penchant for scenes of couples sitting uncomfortably on couches or beds under windows. One remembers the awkward silences as much as the spoken words. The filmmaker’s raw material is provincial life and its cast of somewhat inarticulate, diffident, even alienated characters. With that unglamorous material he paints a picture of elemental human striving—for love and companionship, for kindness, for a freer existence—and the obstacles it comes up against. Perhaps this is what Jia means when he writes that he wants “to explore and exhibit progressive power hidden among people.” It is difficult to conceive of such an artist emerging entirely apart from the development of a generally more critical atmosphere, in China and elsewhere. He is a major filmmaker.

An issue that was discussed in the first part of this series initially arose following a viewing of *Platform*. Jia depicts two realities, both harsh and unsatisfying. His own approach to life, his humanity and compassion and lyricism, suggest a third reality, something that still needs to be created. This may say something significant about the role of art. When I asked Jia about it, in the interview posted below, I was afraid from his response that something—literally—had been lost in the translation. Later, on rereading his comments, I think he did understand the point. He spoke about the need for a “more forgiving” way of living. I was moved by the film and our conversation (also present was actress Zhao Tao), as brief as it was.

David Walsh: I saw this film and your previous film, *Xiao Wu*. First of all, I want to say how beautiful they are.

Jia Zhang-ke: Thank you.

DW: And I feel like asking how someone so young can make something so beautiful. You needn’t answer that. I wonder if you could explain a little about your life and background?

JZ: I was born in 1970 in a small city, Fenyang, near the Yellow River, in Shanxi Province. It’s a very closed-minded place. In those days for a young person like me coming from a small remote town in China the only chance for a brighter chance was to go to university. My grades were not that great, so in order to get into university it seemed to make sense to go into fine arts, which had lower requirements. So I went to school in the capital of Shanxi, and studied oil painting for two years. At that time I saw a film by Chen Kaige, *Yellow Earth* [1984], and as a result decided to become a filmmaker.

There are two ways to become a filmmaker. One is to have a parent or a relative who is in the film industry, to have connections, the other way is to get into the Beijing Film Academy, which is the leading film school in

the country. In 1993 I was able to gain admittance to the Literature Department of the film academy.

In the early 1990s when I saw *Yellow Earth*, that was an experience that had a great impact on me. I saw the possibility of a new method of making films. Before that it had all been more or less propaganda. At that time the environment was fairly suffocating, so I had to go through an internal process of growth and learning, and figure out what it meant to be a filmmaker.

DW: What was the social or personal significance of the 1980s for you?

JZ: For me there are two ways of approaching filmmaking in general. There is the mainstream method, official films, approved of by the government. The other is the independent, personal approach. For me, the personal influence, the personal memory that I want to express in the film is very important. This was the first decade in which the changes in China made themselves apparent.

In the 1980s China went through very rapid and very drastic social changes. It became a very materialistic country. It was very difficult, especially in a small city in a remote province. I felt alienated to a certain extent from the process, which seemed to be hurting the weaker classes. Not only the poorer people, but artists too. Those who were not so materialistic. The strong survived, that was the situation. Many people have not enjoyed the benefits of the changes.

DW: Both films treat people with great sympathy, which is rare. And also with great patience. Things take time in these films. Is there some artistic and psychological significance to that pace?

JZ: I could have done this film in two different ways. One is the fast-paced, strong-impact method of showing the changes, that might be better for a mass audience. The other way, the way it was in fact done, is to proceed slowly, to reflect the way in which the changes expressed themselves to people at the time—gradually. That's more difficult to do. But potentially more rewarding.

I wanted to proceed patiently and to show people's patience, and the way in which events developed over a long period of time. I wanted to show how the quality of relationships was changed over time.

DW: What is the situation for young filmmakers in China today?

JZ: On the one hand, China has opened up, in the sense that funds are coming in, and productions and co-productions are possible. The possibilities for filmmakers are greater. That's the positive aspect. That allows independent filmmakers to make films. On the other hand, the censorship is getting more and more strict. So the opportunities for independent filmmakers to distribute their works are increasingly slim. It's a very contradictory and painful situation.

DW: Will this film be shown in China?

JZ: This film has never been approved by the government. So I imagine that it will be a long time before it is shown.

I must add that there are various ways to get the film to audiences in China. It's on DVD, and on the market.

DW: I'd like to ask Zhao Tao about the experience of this film and Mr. Jia's methods of directing.

Zhao Tao: From 1990 to 1998 I studied and taught dance. At the time he [Jia] was doing auditions he came to my class at Shanxi University. He came to audition some of the students. Fortunately, I was chosen.

This was my first time as an actor, in *Platform*. I find that dancing and filmmaking are two quite distinct art forms, involving different parts of the body and brain. The differences are great, but I hope that I brought something from dance to film. I learned a great deal from the filmmaker. He helped me a great deal and was very supportive.

DW: The film describes the old situation, under what I would call Stalinism, and that was obviously repressive and impossible, then it describes the new market economy coming into existence, which also creates great suffering. Those are the two realities in the film, old and new, but there is also another reality, which is the reality of the film itself.

Because of the director's own attitude and the feeling of the film. So this suggests, perhaps unconsciously, that a third reality is possible, a more human reality, different than both of those. Is that a correct conclusion?

JZ: These are interesting questions. Average Chinese people have lived through the Maoist generation and the Deng Xiaoping generation. And now there is a new situation yet again. It is very difficult to compare. In both previous generations, people suffered and had pain and people experienced joy. In any situation, I think, people have to make compromises. Now they realize there might be a new way of living, which is more forgiving. All of a sudden people turn 30 and they realize, well, that's pretty sad. Because people have to take responsibility. Is that clear?

DW: Sort of.

JZ: When you turn 30 you realize the sort of responsibility you have to take in life. To be patient with other people, to think. People have high expectations, they expect a great deal. They're naturally impatient. During the Mao generation there was a certain romantic way of living, with great sacrifices, but you had to pay a high price. The new way takes a long time, patience, everybody is more moderate. You pay a price either way. But, yes, people should be more forgiving. Life should be different, although I have no clear answers.

Edward Yang, born in Shanghai in 1947, was one of the founding members of the new Taiwanese cinema. He gained a reputation with such films as *Taipei Story* (1985), *A Brighter Summer Day* (1991) and *A Confucian Confusion* (1994). He is known for his consideration of contemporary Taiwanese manners and morals. *Yi Yi* is his most recent work.

I'm told that "Yi Yi" means "one-one" and can also mean "individually." This apparently refers to the distinct ways in which the characters respond to life and society.

A great many things go on, again during the course of three hours, involving "NJ" Jian and his extended family. The marriage of his idiotic brother-in-law is disrupted by the appearance of a jilted girlfriend. NJ's mother-in-law suffers a stroke and enters into a coma. His daughter, who feels responsible for the old woman's condition, begins a tentative romance. His wife takes stock of her life and finds it wanting: "I have so little? How can it be so little? I live a blank.... What am I doing every day?" She goes off to a Buddhist retreat on a mountain and returns with her Master, who accepts checks. Her young son faces his own crisis, bullied by girls and isolated from those around him. He seems on his way to becoming an artist; he photographs the backs of people's heads to help them see themselves more fully.

NJ encounters an old girlfriend, Sherry. He's sufficiently unhappy or distracted to pursue the possibilities in the situation. Years before he'd disappeared from her life, without a word. "Why didn't you come that day? I never got over it." Sent by his apparently failing computer company on a business mission to Japan, NJ arranges to spend some time there with Sherry. She tells him again, "That day, I waited and waited. I was so angry." He says, lamely: "You pushed me to be an engineer. You can't run someone's life." In the end, he can't go through with the affair and rushes out of the hotel room. "Why do I always make the same mistake?"

NJ's partners betray him, refusing to sign with a Japanese computer genius and instead opting for a cheap imitation. "Where is our dignity?" he asks. "What's that got to do with business?" one of his associates responds.

There are truly remarkable and compelling moments in *Yi Yi*, but it feels driven by distinct and at times mutually exclusive impulses. Indeed this problem manifests itself in the structure of the work: the various strands of the narrative feel driven by distinct impulses and produce quite different responses in a spectator. Those elements of the film bound up with NJ and his business partners and his wife and her Buddhism have something unsettling and authentic about them. One feels in the presence of

individuals trapped or who have trapped themselves in impossible circumstances: material wealth and moral emptiness.

On the other hand, in my view, the stories of the son and daughter seem animated by a rather complacent desire to trace “interpersonal relations” and the “rhythms of life” in an abstract and not terribly interesting manner. It's all rather neatly packaged. The relationship between the daughter and her grandmother seems stale, as does the Sherry episode. Perhaps in an instinctive response to the tameness of too much of the film, Yang has provided a “dramatic” denouement (a shooting), which merely strikes one as extraneous and contrived.

The greatest strength of the film, in my view, is the character of NJ. He is a substantial figure, a principled and tormented man in an unprincipled and self-satisfied milieu. I was pleased to discover that the “actor” playing the part is the veteran screenwriter and director Wu Nien-jen (hence “NJ”?). Wu, born in 1952, authored the scripts for Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Dust in the Wind* (1986), *City of Sadness* (1989) and *The Puppetmaster* (1993), as well as Yang's *That Day, on the Beach* (1983). He also directed the remarkable *A Borrowed Life* (1994), about his father, which I thought one of the best films of the past decade. I give full credit to Yang for casting him. Whatever contradictory impulses may be at work, the role of NJ is a significant contribution and Wu is continuously riveting.



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