

Jia Zhangke's *Mountains May Depart*: Three periods in modern China, a good deal of confusion

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Chinese filmmaker Jia Zhangke's Mountains May Depart is opening in theaters in the US this week. The following comment is based on material posted as part of the WSWS coverage of the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival.

Jia Zhangke is a well-known and often intriguing Chinese film director (*Xiao Wu* [*Pick Pocket*], *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*, *The World*). We have interviewed him twice for the *World Socialist Web Site*, in 2000 and 2004. At his best, he has been forthright in condemning the vast social inequality in China and portraying its dramatic social and psychic consequences.

Jia's *Mountains May Depart* takes place in three different years, 1999, 2014 and 2025. In the first section, a small-town dance instructor, Tao (Zhao Tao, the filmmaker's wife), has two suitors, a shy coal miner, Liangzi (Liang Jing Dong), and an up-and-coming "entrepreneur," Zhang (Zhang Yi). She chooses the latter and eventually gives birth to a son her husband revealingly names "Dollar."

Fifteen years later, Tao is wealthy and not happy. She helps out the miner, who is now ill, and his wife. She divorces Zhang ("a real capitalist"), who emigrates to Australia with their son. In 2025, her now ex-husband, wanted for economic crimes in China, is still living in Australia with "Dollar" (Dong Zijian). The latter takes up with an older, middle-class woman (Sylvia Chang). He barely remembers his mother. She is still in China. We last see her out in the snow performing a dance ...

The most interesting character, because he is the most human of them all and his situation is the most compelling, is the coal miner, Liangzi. Unfortunately,

we lose sight of him part-way through *Mountains May Depart*. Jia is a very perceptive observer, but he has little sense of the axis of social life. Characters and episodes are largely individual, unconnected in an important way.

The lack of coherent social and historical perspective is especially damaging in this case, because Jia seems instinctively drawn to sharp, honest pictures of modern Chinese life. He was born in 1970 in a provincial city, Fenyang, "near the Yellow River, in Shanxi Province," as he explained in our 2000 conversation at the Toronto film festival.

I asked him then about the "social or personal significance of the 1980s," the years when Deng Xiaoping presided over the restoration of the "free market" in China and the country's ultimate transformation into the premier cheap labor platform on the planet.

Jia responded, "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."

Four years later, also in Toronto, based on a viewing of *The World*, which seemed to be making some fairly pointed comments about globalization and related economic changes, I engaged Jia in a discussion about those processes.

In fact, at one point I asked him point blank, "What is your attitude toward globalized capitalism?" He

replied, “Major companies, especially from the US and other big countries, are benefiting from these low-paid workers, and also Chinese companies too. So these workers are the victims of this globalization. So before the country becomes wealthy again, there’s a stage in which a lot of people are going to sacrifice, but the business people don’t care about this. They don’t care at all.”

“So the government should intervene and defend people. Because these workers work the longest hours, the most dangerous jobs and get the lowest wages. Some of these workers work 18 hours a day. Like the conditions of another century.”

Jia’s films (including documentaries) made during the mid-2000s and later, *Still Life*, *Dong*, *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew*, were generally less interesting. They seemed in part a response to pressure from the regime on Chinese “independent” cinema (Jia made his first several films without obtaining government approval), which expressed itself in nationalism and also a turn to studying the not very fascinating concerns of new middle class layers. Above all, their passivity was disturbing.

His *A Touch of Sin* (2013), four stories centering on inequality and injustice, represented something of a revival. Jia told an interviewer, “I wanted to use these news reports to build a comprehensive portrait of life in contemporary China ... Many people face personal crises because of the uneven spread of wealth across the country and the vast disparities between the rich and the poor.” All to the good.

Unhappily, *Mountains May Depart* is not a strong work, aside from the glimpses of the loathsome, gun-toting entrepreneur and the struggling coal miner. The final section in Australia is unconvincing from almost every point of view. Directing in another language—much of this segment is in English—is the least of the director’s problems here.

Reflecting the confusion, Jia comments in his director’s note: “China’s economic development began to skyrocket in the 1990s. Living in this surreal economic environment has inevitably changed the ways that people deal with their emotions. The impulse behind this film is to examine the effect of putting financial considerations ahead of emotional relationships. If we imagine a point ten years into our future, how will we look back on what’s happening

today? And how will we understand ‘freedom’?

“Buddhist thought sees four stages in the flow of life: birth, old age, sickness and death. I think the ultimate point of this film is to say: Whatever times we live through, none of us can avoid experiencing those stages, those difficult moments.

“*Mountains may depart*, [but] relationships may endure.”

Buddhist thought? This is very weak.

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Note to readers: Ramin Bahrani’s valuable *99 Homes*, a drama about the foreclosure crisis, is now available on VOD and DVD.



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