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 **UCLPRESS**

REVIEW

Jia Zhangke, *I Wish I Knew* (2010)

By B. D. Morgan

To 'shanghai' means to kidnap. From the precipitate flight of the Kuomintang in 1949 to Expo 2010, out-Ballarding Ballard, the post-war history of China's largest city is a history of coercive motion, ideological violence and furious remaking, remarkable even by the standards of the age. Jia Zhangke has a great deal to be bereft over in *I Wish I Knew*, a documentary-cum-peroration that seeks to do for Shanghai what Terence Davies's *Of Time And The City* (2008) could not do for another of the world's great ports: make the dramatic indices of memory and exile adhere to the dimensions of the present moment. Jia's exceptional past success in securing foreign distribution and attention for his resolutely uncommercial oeuvre means a peculiar role now devolves to him amongst Chinese filmmakers of the so-called Sixth Generation – that of socio-cultural exegete for the Sinophile West; and it is a responsibility that the director continues to wear well. *I Wish I Knew* may not live up to its own high synthesising ambitions, but Jia's failure is far nobler than Davies's; in the case of Shanghai, the extreme nature of the contrast between what has been taken and what is left behind both magnifies the scale of the documentarian's task and serves as a useful prophylactic against the too-easy aesthetics of minor-key yearning.

Combining archival material, (highly) digressive interviews with current and erstwhile residents of the city, and Jia's own footage depicting Shanghai's harbour, courtyards and skyscrapers from the 1990s up to the present day, *I Wish I Knew* offers two stories that the director clearly believes are inseparable in the telling: the bloody and reprisal-ridden victory of the People's Liberation Army over Chiang Kaishek's Nationalists, which scattered a Shanghainese diaspora across the world (some of the elderly emigrés featured in the film supplement faltering Chinese with English words and phrases, linguistic markers both of their estrangement from the nation they still regard as *patria* and of the legacy left by a century of European dominion in the city of their birth); and the post-1949 recasting of Shanghai as, by turns, a cradle of collectivist fervour and a steel-and-plate-glass emblem of China's thoroughgoing rapprochement with the free market.

Like Dos Passos in *Manhattan Transfer*, Jia is often happy to relinquish control of the city-matter to his denizen-protagonists, many of whose contributions depart wilfully from the ostensible grand narrative in favour of touching but barely coherent personal reminiscence; as a result, Shanghai's *genius loci* is, like New York's in Dos Passos' novel, cast pleasingly to the four winds. Prim and proper pensioners, dancing glacially to Thirties

(American) jazz standards, standing up for the life-or-death choices of their long-dead parents, KMT or Maoist underground, are not cast as museum-pieces or facile upright counterpoints to a footloose post-modernity; rather, they remind us that, since a city is made of iterations on lore, and lore's purpose is to console rather than to edify, the prevailing figure of the palimpsest is in many cases rather less apt for urban surfaces than that of the (more-or-less artfully) retouched photograph. Jia's 2008 film *24 City* took a striking formal step through the permeable wall that separates representation from artifice, including amongst its 'interviews' four *scripted* monologues, delivered by actors but unacknowledged as such; *I Wish I Knew*, whose 'documentary' locations include film-sets and opera auditoria, also flaunts the theatrical aspect of the 'true-life story'.

Unlike Dos Passos, however, whose inter-war Mannahatta contains downtown jobbers' houses as well as Broadway trottoirs, Jia occupies himself almost exclusively with the *patrician* experience of the dislocation wrought by strife, time and distance. His speaking subjects, whether dispossessed daughters of the Qing like Zhang Xinyi or inheritors of Party-prescribed adulation (such as the daughter of the executed revolutionary Wang Xiaohe), wander off topic with an air of unassailable proprietary entitlement. Even those long resident in Taiwan, like the filmmaker Hou Hsiao-Hsien (the focus of a pastoral segment that strains too hard for elegy), continue to claim Shanghai as their own not only because they have loved it and it has shaped them, but also with an eye to long-repealed statutes of dynastic succession. Their histories are valid and absorbing; but a city once inhabited by almost a quarter of a million stevedores and whose more recent upgrade to megalopolis status could not have been accomplished without mass recourse to poor-migrant labour deserves a demotic perspective to supplement the elite ones represented here.

I Wish I Knew is least successful where it takes leave of the talking heads to pursue some fairly spurious lines of visual inquiry. Cutting together two shots of the banks of Shanghai's main tributary (one from Lou Ye's 2000 film *Suzhou River* and the other filmed in 2009) as evidence of the undeniably astonishing rate at which the city's topography has been transformed over the past decade represents a gauche gesture on Jia's part - and one unworthy of a director who demonstrated in *Platform* (2000) that diachronic social change is often depicted most effectively by reference to minutiae; similarly disilluminating is a curious, jejune cameo from Zhao Tao, reprising her desolated-in-designer-labels performance from *24 City* (another film that blends oral testimony with questionable *tableaux vivants*). Zhao's scenes, largely responsible for the soporific quality of the film's final third, should have been cut; and, taking *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew* back-to-back, it is difficult to account for an increasing resort to bricolage, incidental music and - frankly - high-specification frippery on the part of a filmmaker whose best work has been characterised by highly calibrated (not to say monomaniacal) strategies of visual composition. Whatever Jia's motivation, the malaise appears to be spreading: *I Wish I Knew* has a persistent, neurotic queasiness about its *mise-en-scène*, the camera loath to rest even on an interviewee. These, however, are minor quibbles about a highly affecting piece of urban natural history; after all, in a film

such as this one, about a city such as Shanghai, it can hardly count as a crushing demerit that the centre does not hold.

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