

The aesthetic hegemony of ‘Asian Cinema’: An analysis of the Japanese impact on Jia Zhangke(贾樟柯)’s film production

Huang Shiqi

(Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Graduate school of Letters, Kyoto University)

Introduction

By the end of 1980s, even though China has already been in process of modernization for over ten years, the film production industry was still limited to an extremely small number of professional cinematic practitioners due to the backward reform of political system. A near monopoly on film production brought about a variety of problems, including the limitation of free flow of capital which leading to the rigidity and petrification of Chinese film production. However, after a prolonged endeavor of cinematic industry personnel, nowadays, Chinese film industry has a totally different landscape. Transnational investment and collaboration have carried out an action to play a more important role in China’s filmmaking industry and the industry has been more and more opening to exoteric and etc. Using one of the Chinese filmmakers’ articles’ titles to describe Chinese film industry nowadays, it will be ‘The Age of Amateur Cinema is About to Return’¹ and ‘I Heard the Spring of Cinema is Upon Us’².

The acknowledged ‘Sixth Generation’ of directors deserves all the credits for the advantaged situation. The ‘Sixth Generation’ denotes a group of filmmakers who began directing around 1990s. Due to the inadequate production system which blocks out amateurs outside of a few national film studios and theirs focus on severe social issues these two primary factors, it

¹ Jia Zhangke (Author), Claire Huot (Translator), Tony Rayns (Translator), Alice Shih (Translator) *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*, Bridge21 Publications; 1 edition (July 15, 2015)

² Jia Zhangke (Author), Claire Huot (Translator), Tony Rayns (Translator), Alice Shih (Translator) *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*, Bridge21 Publications; 1 edition (July 15, 2015)

is difficult for them to produce a film officially or pass through censorship, and consequently, these filmmakers need to look for investment from outside of China and their works were shown to overseas audiences first. They are also called 'Chinese underground filmmakers', 'Chinese independent filmmakers'. Under the movement of the 'Sixth Generation', it is possible for amateur filmmakers to be explored by holding film festivals and contests. The unconstrained system guarantees the equity and liberty of film industry, and open to transnational capital.

Nowadays, several 'Sixth Generation' filmmakers have already made their works with official approval from the Chinese government. Although their box offices are always passable, they earn their reputation by many international film festivals and worldwide great master of filmmakers.

Following their predecessors ('the Fifth Generation') success internationally, they are considered to be different, primarily owing to their realistic critical voice and aesthetic style that can be generalized as the marginal characters, semi-underground lifestyle, low budget, non-professional actors and improvised script, the critical voice towards society, respect of daily life, long take instead of montage. By combining the critical voice with their aesthetic style, they endowed above-mentioned production pattern and aesthetic style with a function, which is leading to the truth of Chinese today's situation.

Recently, the endeavor to construct so-called 'Asian cinema' has become obvious. Some researches speak highly of the 'Sixth Generation' as the powerful strength to assist constructing the independence of 'Asian cinema'. In order to confront with its counterpart mainstream cinema such as 'Hollywood production' and other blockbusters, the voice of collaboration and uniting of Asian area's filmmaking is becoming louder and louder.

The tendency reveals a cinematic 'Pan-Asianism' that is trying to exceed mainstream cultural hegemony and become independent by constructing the sharing Asian culture. It is also accepted by some of the 'Sixth Generation' directors.

From the 'Chinese independent filmmakers' to the independent 'Asian cinema', is the word 'independent' realistic?

In this thesis, I select one of the ‘Sixth Generation’ directors, Jia Zhangke(贾樟柯), as a case study to analyze the question mentioned above.

Jia Zhangke was born in the year 1970. He produced his first several works on self-raised fund and especially through his first feature-length film *Xiao Wu*(小武), he won a big reputation on the international film circuit around 1998. From that Jia Zhangke embarked on making his films by receiving the fund and help of Japanese film studio such as Takeshi Kitano’ production house until right now.

As an outsider of national film studio from the beginning, by making films through an unofficial way, Jia Zhangke criticizes the Chinese filmmaking system intensively. Besides his film works, he writes articles to speak out straightly. On the one side, in his article, he asks for the independent spirit in contemporary Chinese film directly. On the other side, he is considered to be in the same strain of Michelangelo Antonioni, an Italian film director known for the long take shot. However, both sides are considered to be the independent spirit of Jia Zhangke.

In this thesis, I will focus on the interaction between Jia Zhangke and Japan, by analyzing the problems remained under the cover, I try to reconsider the possibility of the independence of ‘Asian cinema’. In this thesis, not only Jia Zhangke’s films but also his interviews, speeches and essays will be analyzed.

The ‘metaphor of Japan’ in *The World*(世界)

The World was made in the year of 2004, as Jia Zhangke’s first film to gain official approval from the Chinese government; it remained to be a joint-production by Jia Zhangke’s own company, Japan’s Office Kitano, and France’s Lumen Films, it also received additional financial support from the Shanghai Film Studio.³ It tells a story around a group of migrant workers from different rural areas but all work in a theme park located in suburban Beijing, Beijing World Park, which recreates world landmarks at reduced

³ Rooney, David (2004-09-10). "The World Review". Variety.

scales and the performance of folk customs for Chinese tourists. The heroine Zhao Xiaotao works as a performer and her boyfriend Taisheng is a security guard of the park.

Moving the location of this story from Jia Zhangke's hometown Fenyang which is the scene of his most works before to Beijing, and selecting the world park as the specific space show that Jia Zhangke has an ambition to break through, but still persist in revealing normal people's bewildering situation in social transformation. As for the motif of *The World*, Jia Zhangke stated as 'in world park, we can copy a building, but we cannot copy a real life from other country, we cannot copy a social system from other country or we cannot copy a cultural tradition. We still have to face our problem and suffer from that. From this point of view, we are all in the globalization nowadays, but we cannot fix the inequality of time differences due to the historical factors.'

Relating to the production of Jia Zhangke's almost all the film works including *The World*, by then his filmmaking life cannot be away from avoid talking about 'globalization'. From financial fund to collaborative producing system to worldwide circulation, as a filmmaker benefiting from the globalization of film industry, why Jia Zhangke spares no effort to depict the hard situation of people in this globalized world? Except for his realistic critical voice, how does it reflect on Jia Zhangke's attitude towards filmmaking in today's world? More specifically, how does Jia think of Chinese film, Japanese film and world film?

In the film *The World*, I found out some elements that I named as 'metaphor of Japan', which can help with the understanding of Jia Zhangke's film philosophy in a context of the interrelation of China, Asia and the world.

Although since his second feature-length film *Platform*(站台), Jia Zhangke has received the fund from Japanese film studio Office Kitano continuously, but his film works are seldom if ever containing any Japanese narration. The only case of his film works so far is *The World*.

In the next paragraph, I will analyze the Japanese elements in *The World*.

In a review written by the Japanese critic Hasumi Shigehiko, he mentioned that in the film *The World*, there is a scenario that depicts the hero's fellow

migrant from his hometown was dead because of the incident while working. In order to deal with the procedures, his relatives come to Beijing. Hasumi found out that in this setting, the background music is exactly the Japanese director Ozu Yasujiro's film *Tokyo Story's* background music. The same as the relatives are comforted by the music; Hasumi Shigehiko was comforted by the fact that a 70s-born Chinese director from a remote town called Fenyang in Shanxi province knows and even shows a good understanding of the Japanese great film master.

In addition to the background music, in *The World*, another piece of story's title is set up as 'Tokyo Story' directly. The scene happens in the park's Japanese corner with characters wearing kimonos.

The third concerning setting of the film is that two kinds of designs of the posters of *The World* are using the elements of heroine wearing the red color kimono enclosed by the landmarks of the world, such as pyramids, Eiffel Tower, Leaning Tower of Pisa and etc.

These three scattered places are inconspicuous at the first sight but I regard them as the hidden part of the Japanese impact on Jia Zhangke's film production and I would call them 'Japanese metaphors'.

In the beginning, I would like to deal with the third setting. In the film *the world*, there are several separated spaces and these spaces are considered to be full of disparity. The lowest one is the invisible rural area of China. It is the hometown of characters in the film but also the place they want to escape from. The second lowest one is the theme park where they work. It locates in a remote and closed area in suburban Beijing. Therefore it seems to belong to the capital of China but it is different from 'Beijing'. The third lowest one is Beijing, where they will go when they take a break. The fourth one is the external area of China. However, it is an integrated world outside? In fact, in the film the answer is no. We can tell from the same hard situation of a Russian woman Anna, and also can tell from the costume design in the film. There are two kinds of national costumes performances appearing in the film. One of them is a dance about several countries' costume show. However, almost costumes are from countries outside of central western countries. The other one is a kimono show. Apparently, Jia

Zhangke is using the national traditional costume on purpose to construct a visional symbolic world full of imparity. And in his narrative, Japan with countries like India, Mongol and etc. are placed at a lower situation in opposition to the central western countries.

Through analyzing another two settings and Hasumi Shigehiko' word, first of all, we can tell a pure respect towards the director Ozu Yasujiro paid by Jia Zhangke. It is said that Jia Zhangke's film aesthetic preference affected by several film masters. In his own word, Jia speaks highly of Vittorio De Sica and Robert Bresson. The former one is famous for the film *Bicycle Thieves* and the later one is famous for the film *Pickpocket*.⁴ However, we can tell from *The World* that Jia regards Ozu as a cinematic Japanese symbol and it may be a key to his collaboration with Japanese film studio. Secondly, I would look again at Hasumi Shigehiko's word. His pleasure comes from the fact that Japanese film has an impact on the rest of Asian countries. The word also shows his expectation towards the later comers of film producing in Asian countries. And it is the time to build up an 'Asian cinema' castle. His thinking can be found in many Japanese film participators' statements.

The role of Japanese film industry in Jia Zhangke' s filmmaking

Regarding Jia Zhangke's film production, there is a critical person cannot be neglected of mention. As a Japanese film producer, Ichiyama Shozo has participated in the production of six Jia Zhangke's film works; they are *Platform* (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *The World* (2004), *24 City* (2008), *A Touch of Sin* (2013) and *Mountains May Depart* (2016).

According to Ichiyama Shozo' recall, he met Jia Zhangke's film at Berlin International Film Festival in the first place and then he was moved by this young director's first feature-length work *The Pickpocket* (97). Knowing that Jia Zhangke was searching for the international fund and producer at that

⁴ A People's Director from the Grassroots of China -A concersation between Liu Xudong and Jia Zhangke, Jia Zhangke (Author), Claire Huot (Translator), Tony Rayns (Translator), Alice Shih (Translator) *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*, Bridge21 Publications: 1 edition (July 15, 2015)

time, Ichiyama Shozo introduced him to the responsible personnel of the Office Kitano at the following film festival Pusan International Film Festival in the same year. And this meeting brings Jia Zhangke a deal with Office Kitano and a series of collaborations with Ichiyama Shozo.

Before taking charge of Jia Zhangke's film production, Ichiyama Shozo has worked with the Taiwanese director Hou Xiaoxian for a long time and has already produced *Good Men, Good Women* (1995), *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996) and *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998) successfully.

Similarly, Ichiyama Shozo also met Hou Xiaoxian at the international film festival when he was in charge of the 'Asian Excellent Film Week' (アジア秀作映画週間) program at Tokyo International Film Festival in 1993. At that time, Ichiyama Shozo worked at Shochiku film studio and got an approval from the company to invest Hou Xiaoxian's next film.

As for Ichiyama Shozo, participating in the international festival is not only helping with Japanese films' circulation and advertising but also a stage to know more about films and directors around the world.

When Ichiyama Shozo talked about his experience of The Festival of the Three Continents held in France, which is a film festival devoted to the cinemas of Asia, and Africa and Latin America, he said:

The experience at that time helped me a lot when I began to launch the Tokyo Filmex later. I don't want a big film festival like The Cannes Film Festival or The Venice Film Festival; I only want a small film festival but with a distinct principle and without missing any good works.⁵

Through international festivals, Ichiyama Shozo started a new way of film production in Japan by making films with international collaborations.

As for the Japanese film industry of the day, international co-production was a rare thing. At Japan's side, in Ichiyama's own word, one of the merits is:

At that time, it was a difficult job to sell Japanese films outside of Japan. The international branch of Shochiku existed in name only. Therefore the company would benefit from the investment thrown into the directors like Hou Xiaoxian. ⁶

⁵ The Interview With Ichiyama Shozo, Tokyo Art University, 2013.9.6

⁶ The Interview With Ichiyama Shozo, Tokyo Art University, 2013.9.6

However, as mentioned above, Ichiyama Shozo's another act shows that his ambition beyond the economic benefit. In the same year of producing Jia Zhangke's film *Platform*, Ichiyama established the film festival Tokyo FILMeX. It is a film festival with a policy of 'Auteur Theory' and concentrating on screening Asian countries' independent films. The principle of this film festival is never burying any good works.

Actually, considering the collaboration between Ichiyama Shozo and Jia Zhangke, it is a sign of Ichiyama attempting to discover the unknown director and helping him with his filmmaking career. However, under this beautiful story of cooperation and collaboration, is there any hidden information has not been analyzed yet?

The problem is who owns the power to define a good work? And how to define a good work? As is well known that the evaluation standard of every film festival differs from each other. And any film festival claims to be more objective than the others will turn out to be a fake. As for continuously occurring small-scale film festivals, some of them devote themselves to the development of 'Asian cinema' and highly praise the works attaining their standard. The cooperation of film festivals and directors has made a big success in today's film industry.

In the case of Ichiyama Shozo and Jia Zhangke, is there a common belief used by them to build up an aesthetic hegemony?

In order to answer this question, I looked again at Jia Zhangke's usage of Ozu Yasujirō in his film and found out that Ozu Yasujirō can be a clue.

Jia Zhangke's aesthetic attitude

A year just before the film *The World* came out, Jia Zhangke wrote an article in memory of the Japanese director Ozu Yasujirō's 100th anniversary of birth. Interestingly, '*The World Sits On a Tatami*', the article's title, is very reminiscent of *The World*. In this article, Jia Zhangke described and highly praised Ozu's cinematic aesthetic in this way, he said:

Ozu's birth and death are such a legend, but his film works are rooting in the daily life so deeply. Ozu found out the best point of view to observe Japanese

life, which is family. The familial relationship is the foundation of eastern people to build up social relationship. There is no need to go that far, Japan sits on a tatami, the world sits on a tatami. On the journey of filmmaking, Ozu applied the uninterrupted narrative tact and unmoved shooting style to his works. This kind of effort creates what Kurosawa Akira called ‘ the beauty of Japanese films’. Until now, it has already become the ‘ paragon of eastern cinematic aesthetics’ that makes Hou Xiaoxian and Wim Wenders worship, makes directors gain their spiritual power generation after generation.⁷

In Jia Zhangke’s description, Ozu Yasujirō’s film aesthetics can be concluded as ‘ respect for daily life’, ‘static scenes’ and ‘ paragon of eastern cinematic aesthetics’. And if we focalize the aesthetic attitude that Jia Zhangke stated when he talked about his filmmaking, we would find out the similarity between Jia Zhangke and what he described Ozu Yasujirō.

In the article *My Focus*, Jia Zhangke expressed his shooting notion of the second short film *Xiao Shan Going Home* (1995) as ‘ today, when people get used to the high-speed audiovisual playing way, whether is there anyone has patience to stare into the ultimate reality through the camera with us’, ‘in *Xiao Shan Going Home*, ours camera is not erratic any longer. We would like to face the reality, though the reality contains ours weakness and dirty of human nature.’⁸

And in the article *I Don’t Romanticize My Experience*, he said: ‘ I would like to focus on normal people by filmmaking. First of all, we need to respect ours daily life. As time goes by slowly, we could feel every plain life’s pleasure and heaviness in detail.’⁹

We can tell that there is an identity of Jia Zhangke and Ozu’s cinematic aesthetics, however, Jia Zhangke traces his aesthetic tradition back to the

⁷The World Sits On a Tatami, Jia Zhangke (Author), Claire Huot (Translator), Tony Rayns (Translator), Alice Shih (Translator) *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*, Bridge21 Publications; 1 edition (July 15, 2015)

⁸My Focus, Today’s Pioneer, 1997

⁹I Don’t Romanticize My Experience, Jia Zhangke (Author), Claire Huot (Translator), Tony Rayns (Translator), Alice Shih (Translator) *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*, Bridge21 Publications; 1 edition (July 15, 2015)

Chinese director Yuan Muzhi(袁牧之) who made his film *Angels on the Road* in 1937. In Jia's lecture *We Need to Recognize the Defect in our Genes*, he described the film *Angels on the Road* like: 'although it is a left-wing film but its significant artistic achievement cannot be neglected. The achievement is the tradition to depict the daily life of Shanghai vividly, which has been destructed and forgotten after 1949. We always say that this tradition can be found in Ozu and Hou Xiaoxian's films, but *Angels on the Road* obtains this tradition a long time ago.

Even though Jia Zhangke made his effort to build up a tradition of Chinese film, which needs to be traced to 1920s-1940s old Chinese films, he admits Ozu Yasujirō as the 'paragon of eastern cinematic aesthetics'. Then is the tradition of respecting daily life is a general principle of filmmaking or further more at a highest aesthetic place better than other aesthetic preference? And is it able to stand for the whole eastern world?

When we talked about the traditional Chinese artistic aesthetic preference, never would we regard 'a tradition of respecting for daily life' as an essential part of it. Instead, the aesthetic tradition is completely affected by 'poem speech will'¹⁰ that values highly of expressing profound ideas, emotions and aspirations when people produce artistic works. Another aesthetic tradition can be traced to the work of *Zhuang Zi*, which provides us with a narrative pattern: allegory.

As intensely criticized by Jia Zhangke, most of the 'Fifth Generation' directors follow the filmmaking way of selecting romantic masteries, setting a symbolic meaning of motif. In Jia Zhangke's consideration, this kind of narrative aesthetics is merely the childish fairy tale without any courage to face the reality of contemporary China.¹¹ However, the way of revealing the reality should not be limited to the only one aesthetic preference, 'direct depiction of daily life', but open to a diversity of narrative pattern.

When we look at the history of cultural communication between China and

¹⁰ 诗言志, a traditional Chinese view towards the function of poetry

¹¹ I Don't Romanticize My Experience, Jia Zhangke (Author), Claire Huot (Translator), Tony Rayns (Translator), Alice Shih (Translator) *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*, Bridge21 Publications; 1 edition (July 15, 2015)

the West, China and Japan, we would find out that in Japan, there is a deep tradition of I-novel aesthetics that has a profound impact spreading to other genre of art. To some extent, Ozu Yasujirō's cinematic aesthetics inherits the tradition of I-novel.

At that time, when Jia Zhangke showed his approval attitude towards certain aesthetic preference, he stands on a same side with Ozu Yasujirō and Hou Xiaoxian, which gains him the appreciation of Ichiyama Shozo.

The Attitude Towards 'Asian Cinema'

In the article *The Age of Amateur Cinema is About to Return*, Jia Zhangke shows his favorable attitude towards constructing a community of 'Asian Cinema'. He agreed with Oguri Kōhei's statement that although there is a big improvement of Asian films' production level to match the world films, the spirit in the Asian films has reduced. In the next narration, Jia Zhangke expressed his worry towards Asian countries' national films due to the financial crisis, the invading of Hollywood movies and global unified aesthetic tendency. In his statement, he looks for the diversity of culture.

Conclusion

By analyzing Jia Zhangke's film works especially *The World* and his discourses towards filmmaking, we could find the inconsistent part in his narration art. As an outsider of Chinese film industry in the beginning, Jia Zhangke has to rely on Japanese financial fund to speak out his aesthetic idea when he confronted with the old generation.

The collaboration is based on an identity of aesthetic preference between Jia Zhangke and the Japan's side. At the end, this aesthetic preference has become an aesthetic hegemony when they separately make use of it to express their ideas of a good film in the 'Asian cinema' discourse.

References

- Jia Zhangke (Author), Claire Huot (Translator), Tony Rayns (Translator), Alice Shih (Translator) *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*, Bridge21 Publications; 1 edition, 2015
- Zhang Yiwu, *The Critical Point of China Film in 2010*, 2010
- Zhang Yiwu, *Chinese High Budget Film in Chinese Film History in These Ten Years*, 2012
- Zhou Anhua, *The rise of Asian Cinema*, 2013
- Huang Jin, *Asian Imagination and Identity*, 2015