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A Platform to Speak and The World to Listen: Creative Freedom, Government Policy, and Chinese Film

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A *PLATFORM* TO SPEAK AND *THE WORLD* TO LISTEN: CREATIVE FREEDOM, GOVERNMENT POLICY, AND CHINESE FILM

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ABSTRACT

When considering the Chinese domestic film industry, debates often arise regarding government involvement and the degree to which this interferes with filmmakers' creative freedom. Concerns over censorship and propaganda have given rise to the common assertion that state control continues to be overbearing and manipulative, but others challenge this view and maintain that the film industry is closer to a free market now that government intervention has been scaled back. This dissension naturally raises the question: how do Chinese government policies towards their domestic film industry impact filmmakers' creative freedom? This tension is examined with the claim that Chinese government policies towards their domestic film industry constrain narratives in exchange for enabling greater scope. The claim is explored under the lens of Chinese domestic filmmaker Jia Zhangke, who was once a banned director that illegally produced films outside of the government system but was later welcomed into the fold and now produces films officially within the system. Particular focus is given to the underground film *Platform* and the aboveground film *The World* to investigate what effects government policy has had on the production of these domestic films.

INTRODUCTION

Many people have the impression that the relationship between China's government and its domestic film industry is one of total state control, a haven for censorship and propaganda that is accordingly rather devoid of free market and free speech. Wendy Su advocates for this argument when she claims, "In China, cinema remains an important propaganda tool and is heavily loaded with party-sanctioned ideology… the government interfered excessively with the market through its administrative orders, failing to consider audiences' desires and preferences."[1] Others claim that this judgment is hyperbolic and that the relationship is in fact not incredibly far removed from that of Hollywood and its governing organizations, that the situation in China is certainly more stringent but allows for a larger degree of freedom for film production than many at first assume. Rui Zhang directs attention to such a softened stance by the state in recent years when she states, "In the early 2000s… the film administration officials finally took the audacious step of acknowledging cinema as an industry that should operate primarily under market demand and aim at profit-making, rather than a propaganda tool under full control of the Party."[2] There is no doubt between the two camps that Chinese government policy plays a significant role in domestic film affairs, but the nature of the relationship remains a point of contention. This dissension naturally raises the question: how do Chinese government policies towards their domestic film industry impact filmmakers' creative freedom?

Many Americans may at first see little need to determine the truth of the matter. The fixation on primarily domestic films in America leaves them far more insulated to foreign films

[1] Wendy Su, *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood : Cultural Policy and the Film Industry, 1994-2013* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2016), 27-28.

[2] Rui Zhang, *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang : Commercialization and Censorship in Chinese Cinema After 1989* (Aberdeen, Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2008), 117.

than are many other nations' populations. For instance, the Motion Picture Academy is generally accepted within America as one of the indisputable global authorities on the prestige of film due to their yearly Academy Awards, or Oscars, and yet most foreign films are only considered for the Best International Feature Film (previously Best Foreign Language Film) award, which is in turn further restricted by each country being limited to nominating only one of their domestic films for consideration.[3] In spite of this general unfamiliarity with international film, in truth there is a great contemporary importance to be found in the pursuit of such a question regarding Chinese domestic film in particular. First is the consideration of global economic importance, seeing as China has held on to the title of world's largest box office and their domestic films have been cracking into the global top grossing lists, such as 2020's The Eight Hundred[4] and 2021's The Battle at Lake Changjin.[5] Their film industry is remarkably healthy, to a degree that it could usurp Hollywood in time, which makes its relationship with the Chinese government a key point of interest to the global future of film. Second is the consideration of cultural influence. Since stories shape identity and culture, and film is one of the most prominent methods of story diffusion in modern times, analyzing the influence of government in this regard may provide unique insights into its role in shaping or maintaining particular facets of cultural and national identity. Last is the consideration of introspective importance – even those that do not have a particular interest in China or Chinese film may gain a greater understanding of how their own

[3] "Special Rules for the International Feature Film Award," Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, last modified July 13, 2021, https://www.oscars.org/sites/oscars/files/94aa_international_feature.pdf.

[4] "2020 Worldwide Box Office," Box Office Mojo, accessed May 13, 2022, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/2020/.

[5] Box Office Mojo. "2020 Worldwide Box Office." Accessed May 13, 2022. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/year/world/2020/.

domestic film industry, and thus the stories they consume, may be affected by political and social forces, thus leading to further personal benefits in media literacy and critical thinking.

In pursuit of greater appraisal of these matters, the claim is put forth that Chinese government policies towards their domestic film industry constrain narratives in exchange for enabling greater scope. As will be explored, the domestic film industry in China such as it exists now is regulated by government policies that only allow films with government approval to access crucial filmmaking infrastructure, allowing for selective control over which films are made available to the public. With only one avenue available for official production and distribution, the vast majority of domestically produced films have no choice but to submit to this process.

In order to proceed, some phrases must first be defined to dispel confusion. Foremost, the phrases 'Chinese government' and 'Chinese domestic film industry' as used will refer specifically to mainland China, that is to say all of what China considers to be their territory except for Hong Kong and Taiwan. Chinese cinema is often considered in three veins – mainland, Hong Kong, and Taiwan cinema – but for the purposes of analyzing a government-industry relationship they must be kept separate to avoid complications in making a single claim that must apply to three separate relationships. Though globally recognized as part of China, Hong Kong has its own separate governance under the 'One Country, Two Systems' principle.[6] In much the same way, Hong Kong also has its own individual film industry that functions separately from the mainland's. Taken together, it becomes apparent that it would be imprudent to conflate Hong Kong's government-industry relationship with that of the mainland as it may

[6] Jeffrey N. Wasserstrom, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern China* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 264-265.

have entirely unique conclusions. Though recognition of Taiwan as Chinese territory is highly debated from region to region, it is clear that they have their own governance system as well, with their own leadership and constitution that operate independently from the mainland system. It is this government system that Taiwan's film industry answers to, so again examinations of its government-industry relations must be considered separately. While Hong Kong and Taiwan's government-industry relationships as they affect cinema are also worthy of study, herein they will be excluded from developments concerning 'Chinese government' and 'Chinese domestic film industry' in order to focus on the mainland relationship.

Additionally, it is helpful to provide a short clarification of what is meant by the terms 'creative freedom,' 'scope,' and 'narrative.' Creative freedom refers to what those in the film industry can do, say, and depict – and in some cases, what the consequences are for those actions. Film is a very fluid medium capable of displaying almost any audiovisual combination imaginable, but many combinations are regulated. For example, depictions of sexual or graphically violent acts are commonly met with restrictions for distribution and audience availability, such as how theaters displaying 'rated R' films in America prohibit unaccompanied minors from attending screenings. Scope refers to the potential of film production with all of the possibilities and limitations implied. A modern-day film focusing on a small group in a single locale, like *Napoleon Dynamite*, is incredibly limited in scope and would be feasible for almost any director, while a science fiction war film rife with special effects and famous actors, like *Avatar*, is so large in scope that it requires infrastructural support on many levels. Scope is largely driven by budget, but other factors include things like rights to film on location, access to material resources, and even networking. Narrative refers to the storytelling aspects of film, such as plot, theme, conflict, lesson, symbolism, and imagery. Tweaking just one of these elements

could change a movie greatly, such that the exact same footage can have an entirely different meaning even if something as simple as the musical score is changed. Narrative is the key area where film connects with culture, which makes it quite powerful – and in some perspectives, quite dangerous.

To evaluate the question and claim, three works directed by Jia Zhangke have been selected for analysis. Jia occupies an interesting space in the domain of Chinese domestic film as he started out as an 'underground' film director that illegally produced films outside of the government system but later accepted a government proposal to produce films legitimately within the system.[7] Jia is not the only such underground director turned official, but among them he stands out as one who is adamant about not compromising his filmmaking principles despite the aboveground shift. When asked about the decision he stated, "I didn't change; the environment for Chinese filmmakers changed," referencing that new policies had relaxed enough that he felt he could continue with his own methods unimpeded.[8] He seems true to his word as well, as he was unwilling to compromise over *A Touch of Sin*, a film that had originally cleared censor approval but later received a soft ban.[9] In refusing to make concessions for the film's domestic release, Jia demonstrated that his underground spirit remained in spite of his aboveground nature. His films thus provide a useful line of demarcation by showing where the system is willing to meet halfway with films that won't be compromised, and conversely where

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[7] Paul Pickowicz, *China on Film : A Century of Exploration, Confrontation, and Controversy* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 325.

[8] Valerie Jaffee, "An Interview with Jia Zhangke," *Senses of Cinema*, July, 2004, https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2004/feature-articles/jia_zhangke/.

[9] Edward Wong, "No Release in Sight for Film Exploring China's Violence," *The New York Times*, November 22, 2013, https://sinosphere.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/22/no-release-in-sight-for-film-exploring-chinas-violence/.

the system itself refuses to compromise for films that won't budge. Analyzing his work both inside and outside of the system will give greater insight as to the ways in which government policies impact Chinese domestic film, and his firm stance will allow a more accurate judgment of how much or how little his narratives were truly constrained.

UNDERGROUND FILM AND PLATFORM

The first of Jia Zhangke's works that has been selected is *Platform*,[10] an underground film that was released at the turn of the new millennium in 2000. As an underground film, it was produced and distributed illegally, and to this day it remains domestically unavailable for mainland Chinese audiences to lawfully watch or purchase – although pirated copies can be obtained from bootleggers, a phenomenon about which Jia has expressed mixed feelings over.[11] Despite its domestic obscurity, *Platform* was critically acclaimed overseas. Across five international film festival showings, it won six awards, including the Venice Film Festival's NETPAC Award.[12] Before launching directly into analyzing the content of *Platform*, however, an overview of the state policy restrictions on the film industry circa 2000 is necessary to understand the context of underground film production in mainland China.

Prior to the new millennium, Chinese government control over domestic film distribution and production was exceedingly strict. Before 1993, the China's Film Corporation was the sole purchaser and distributor of film in China:

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[10] *Platform*, directed by Zhangke Jia (2000; London: Artificial Eye, 2002), DVD.

[11] Alice Shih, "Interview. Jia Zhangke: Life and Times Beyond The World," *Cineaction!* 68 (2006): 57.

[12] Su, *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood*, 120.

> Before the reform, the only legitimate film distributor in China was the state-owned China's Film Corporation (CFC). It purchased films outright from studios at a flat rate usually based on the length rather than quality of the film. Although the film studio would not be held responsible for the financial failure of a film, it could not gain profits from a successful one either.[13]

After purchasing a film, they had full control of it such that they could choose not to distribute it at all, or to only distribute it to remote areas with few viewers if they felt that some of the content might agitate the populous cities. Reforms allowed local distributors to purchase films directly and enabled profit sharing between film producers and distributors, though the production aspect was still largely scrutinized. Private film companies could not yet produce films independently, they were required to co-produce with a licensed state film company, and the entirety of a film's script was required by law to be submitted to and approved by the Film Censorship Board before production was allowed to begin. During this period the criteria for what constituted unacceptable material for film was still very restrictive on moral and political grounds:

> Chinese film censorship also has paid great attention to issues of morality. The Tenth Clause of the *Dianying shencha tiaoli* (Regulations of Film Censorship) issued in 1997 specifies that plots containing obscene and vulgar content, such as sex, extramarital affairs, violence, and superstition, or other content that is "abhorrent to morality and virtue", "would need to be deleted and modified." Besides these common concerns, Chinese censors have also paid particular attention to the political and ideological

[13] Zhang, *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang*, 24.

> rectitude of films, the criteria for which are derived from Communist art policy and ideology.[14]

Chinese filmmakers who want to produce films containing such unacceptable material have to produce films independently, commonly referred to as underground filmmaking because of its illegal nature. One of three main compromises here is that, since all avenues of domestic distribution involve cooperation with the Film Censorship Board and a licensed state film company, such an endeavor ensures that their work will be alienated from the domestic Chinese audience, thus divorcing it from the vast primary group of people who are interested in Chinese language films that are set in China and about its people. The second compromise is that all traditional avenues for funding and investment are also tied to the state regulatory system, so independent films are generally funded by modest groups of private individuals unless they can acquire the backing of foreign investors that are willing to engage in the clandestine nature of underground film, which leads to far smaller budgets. The final compromise is that even the act of defying state censorship can only be achieved in exchange for a degree of self-censorship due to the state's watchful eye. As Paul G. Pickowicz explains, the Chinese government makes very little moves towards the underground film scene despite its illegality and is willing to ignore it even when they know when and where an underground film is being shot – unless the content goes too far:

> The state clearly "allows" underground films to be made. But, with one important exception… that no direct criticism of the party or state is allowed. Those who engage in such criticism will be isolated, detained, even jailed. It is crystal clear that underground

[14] Ibid., 26.

> filmmakers generally accept this foundational ground rule. That is to say, despite Jia Zhangke's protestations to the contrary, they willingly engage in self-censorship as the price that must be paid to make underground, private, independent, unofficial films… In return, underground filmmakers get to explore subjects that are not treated in mainstream state productions.[15]

As such, even though underground film ventures are undertaken with the ambition of circumventing government policies, they are nonetheless affected by extant forms of government policy that result in a separate set of limitations.

It is in this environment that Jia Zhangke produced *Platform*. Beginning around the late 1970s and spanning around a decade, it is set after China's Cultural Revolution and explores how everyday citizens were affected by the opening of China. For those unfamiliar with these terms, the Cultural Revolution was "...the high tide of radical politics in China... a period of considerable chaos and change,"[16] incited by then-Chairman Mao Zedong in the 1960s and 1970s, while the opening of China refers to the "Reform of the economy utilizing capitalist techniques (or in Chinese governmental euphemism, "socialism with Chinese Characteristics,")"[17] undertaken by then-Chairman Deng Xiaoping in the late 1970s and 1980s. *Platform*'s narrative focuses on a couple members of the Peasant Culture Group, a troupe of actors and musicians who perform state approved shows such as a rendition of Train Heading for Shaoshan, a tame choreographed musical that glorifies Mao's hometown and the resilience of

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[15] Paul Pickowicz and Yingjin Zhang, *From Underground to Independent : Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 6.

[16] Wasserstrom, *Oxford Illustrated History*, 216.

[17] R. Keith Schoppa, *The Columbia Guide to Modern Chinese History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 129.

peasant communes. Over time there are a great many changes as a result of the economic and cultural transformations occurring in China, however, and the troupe eventually becomes privatized and morphs into The All-Stars Rock'n'Breakdance Electronic Band that performs energetic covers of pop songs accompanied by showy and suggestive dances. The main characters include the musician Cui Mingliang who serves as the primary focus, the dancer Yin Ruijuan who is Cui's love interest, the musician Zhang Jun who is Cui's friend, and the dancer Zhong Ping who is Zhang's girlfriend. Together they navigate cultural and personal changes as Deng Xiaoping's reforms shift China's landscape, exploring themes of transformation, alienation, and resignation.

The film is comprised mostly of still long takes with only a sparse few panning shots, which speaks to the film's small budget. Moving shots are more likely to result in errors, and thus reshoots and wasted time, so still shots are an economic choice. Long takes save money in the editing and compositing process as well, though they are also a stylistic choice that Jia uses purposefully. The majority of the film is shot in ordinary, publicly available locations, contains only trace amounts of original music, and stars no (at the time) recognizable actors. Only Jia Zhangke's old friend and classmate Wang Hongwei (Cui Mingliang) had ever acted on screen before, and only in Jia's own films such as his debut feature film *Xiao Wu* which was also an underground film. Liang Jingdong (Zhang Jun) was an art teacher, Yang Tianyi (Zhong Ping) directed documentaries and only had experience with stage acting, and Zhao Tao (Yin Ruijuan) was a dance teacher.[18] However, *Platform* was still very ambitious for an underground film and used what budget it had to the best effect. With the international recognition gained from *Xiao Wu*'s film festival performances, Jia was able to secure small amounts of funding from a couple

[18] *Platform*.

of international companies from France, Hong Kong, and Japan,[19] which he used on the more demanding aspects of the movie. As he recalls, "I shot "Xiao Wu" in 21 days. "Platform" took almost one year, partly because the script called for three different seasons. There were very few cast and crew members on "Xiao Wu," but "Platform" required almost 100 people."[20] In addition to the longer filming period and larger cast and crew, some scenes in different locations called for traveling which is costly with large groups of people and equipment. All in all, the scope of the film was certainly far smaller than the possibilities offered via working within the official system, as will be seen when comparing the next film, but investment from foreign companies allowed for greater opportunities than what was typical of underground films.

As mentioned prior, political and ideological rectitude are scrutinized by film censors, which would place *Platform* in a tough spot due to various scenes of implied Party criticisms. One such scene begins when Zhang Jun convinces Zhong Ping to get a perm even though she is very reluctant to do so. On their way to the hair salon, they bicycle past a flag-waving march promoting birth control and Deng's new one child policy. Then, with a large portrait of Mao watching over the table, the Peasant Culture Group chief announces the incorporation of pop songs into their performances, when suddenly everyone is stunned into silence by the sight of Zhong Ping entering with a fresh perm. She heads directly to the back despite the stares and some gasps, and the chief makes everyone laugh with a comment that, "She looks like a Spanish girl! She could dance flamenco!"[21] A hard cut shows that she's gone along with their suggestion, dancing flamenco with a Spanish dress and a rose in her mouth as imported flamenco tunes play on the tape deck. Clever camera framing begins her dance in front of the Mao portrait and pans

[19] Su, *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood*, 120.

[20] *Platform*.
[21] Ibid.

away from him, leaving him behind as she dances and twirls further and further. Afterwards, a state broadcast can be heard announcing the posthumous rehabilitation of Liu Shaoqi – a high ranking CCP leader and proposed successor to Mao who was vilified and tortured until death during the Cultural Revolution after opposing Mao's policies:

> A former president of the government and a leader in the Communist Party since 1923, [Liu Shaoqi] was denounced as a "renegade, traitor, and scab hiding in the Party, a lackey of imperialism, modern revisionism, and the Guomindang reactionaries." Liu was placed under house arrest; he was tortured and beaten by Red Guards; and he was left to die, ill, untreated, and isolated in a prison in 1969.[22]

Glossing over the Liu-Mao contention and conveniently avoiding declaring anyone to be in the wrong, the rehabilitation announcement ends with the statement that, "The party resolves to return to the bases of Mao Zedong Thought, under the flag of Mao Zedong Thought. Onward to final victory! Honor to Comrade Liu Shaoqi!"[23] This announcement places the scene in 1980, but also serves to cap off the scene's running theme, namely that China had lost touch with its roots and entered an era of 'out with the old and in with the new.' While pointing out the cultural implications of 'out with tradition, in with pop songs and perms' and highlighting the political maneuverings of 'out with Mao, in with Deng' are not too radical on their own, tying them to Liu Shaoqi and the Cultural Revolution summons thoughts of how all of it would have been grounds for death just years prior, how notions of Mao Zedong Thought and Party unity are foiled by the leadership's personal agendas, and how the announcement may have been more about rehabilitating the image of the Party than that of Liu. Of course, none of this is explicitly stated.

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[22] Schoppa, *The Columbia Guide*, 123.

[23] *Platform*.

Jia Zhangke simply presents a contemporarily credible series of events, thus allowing him to maintain plausible deniability, but the sequence is crafted such that educated audiences will undoubtedly make the connections themselves. In any case, it certainly does not provide the narrative that the party is ideologically righteous.

Seeing as sexual content is listed among the elements that censors find fault with, it should be considered that there is some sexual content in *Platform* as well – in fact, the movie opens with a sexual joke – though there's no undressing or sexual depictions. The most controversial scene in this regard takes place out in a country hospital, where Zhang Jun and Zhong Ping are quiet and crestfallen as they are led away by a doctor. In the waiting area, Cui and the chief discuss the benefits of privatizing the troupe when they are interrupted by trouble. It's revealed that their purpose there is for Zhang Ping to get an abortion as she is pregnant with Zhang Jun's child, but at the last minute she gets distressed and decides against it. Zhang Jun pleads for her to go through with it, and with a trembling voice she slaps him and swears at him before storming into the hospital room. The men remain silently in the hallway, but the somber scene is interrupted by a loud announcement of a parade in honor of Deng and the 35th anniversary of the People's Republic of China, placing the scene in 1984. Triumphant orchestral fanfare from the parade plays as the men smoke in the dark, waiting for Zhong Ping's procedure to finish. Adding another political twist, the celebration of the parade juxtaposed with the bleak circumstances serves to remind the viewer that what is an emotional defeat for the characters is simultaneously one of many victories for Deng in his fight for family planning and a lower birth rate.

In another scene much later in the film, Zhong Ping and Zhang Jun are laying together fully clothed in a small bed and flirting, but a following scene at the local police station shows

that they have been arrested and are being interrogated as to whether or not they have a marriage license or if they are having an affair, implying that they were caught having intercourse, which at that point had become illegal without a marriage license. After a shameful ride home in the back of a police vehicle, Zhong Ping runs away from home without a word and is never seen or heard from again. In these scenes, the act of sex itself is not explicitly mentioned but is heavily implied to the point of not needing to mention it. There is no shying away from the topic of abortion, however, and it is mentioned explicitly. It is unknown whether the topic of abortion in itself would elicit script changes, but it is likely that censors would have at least objected to it being portrayed as a contributing factor in the collapse of young people's happiness instead of as a step towards a happier planned life because such a portrayal reflects negatively on the Party.

There are many other scenes that deserve an honorable mention for objectionable content as well. One among them is a scene where, while traveling for performances circa 1985, the troupe runs across Cui's cousin Sanming and they stay in his town for a short while. During this time, they witness the triumphant introduction of electricity to this rural area for which there is a great amount of praise for the Party, but juxtaposed with this is the poor circumstances that the people of the town live in. None of them are educated and the only options for work are the fields and the mines, the latter of which Sanming goes to in hopes of funding his sister's schooling so she can have a better life. Unable to read, he has Cui read his contract aloud: "Contract. 1: Life and death are questions of fate. I am willing to work in Gao's Mine. Management accepts no blame for accidents. 2: In cases of death or accident, the Mine offers 500 Yuan compensation to families. 3: Daily wage is 10 Yuan."[24] Despite the delivery of

[24] Ibid.

electricity promising modern progress at last, the actual living and working situations are essentially still feudal, which calls into question the priorities of the Party.

In another scene, Cui's father is exposed to be having an affair, buying clothes and gifts for his mistress while on business trips. Much later in the film when Cui visits home, he finds out that his father rarely ever visits home and is running a shop with his mistress, and though his mother detests him they still haven't divorced. Cui tries to visit him but he isn't there, so he leaves a message with his mistress to come visit when he can, but he never does. This explicit example of a marital affair is left unresolved and leads to nothing but familial disharmony. Evidence suggests that the censors would request thematic changes here if this were a scene in an officially produced film. Feng Xiaogang's *Sigh*, also released in 2000 but produced officially within the system, follows a married man's affair. Feng wanted to end the movie with a scene where the man visits his mistress again years later, but the censors made him replace it with an ending where he cuts her off and returns to his family for good, and her trying to call him one final time fills him with fear instead of wistfulness.[25] This shows that affairs were not inherently inadmissible on their own, but censors were disapproving of depictions that continued for long periods of time and split families apart.

Finally, the ending scene leaves off with no happy ending and no true resolution: we see that Cui has made a life with Yin Ruijuan and now has a child, but throughout the long shot he rests listlessly on a chair with a cigarette in his hand as if dead, while Yin Ruijuan puts a kettle on the stove and entertains their child. Cui never became a rockstar, he never got rich, he never managed to make a life outside of his hometown, and even getting together with his old

[25] Zhang, *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang*, 123-124.

sweetheart seems to be a consolation instead of a fulfilment. Despite his whole journey, he seems to have gone nowhere. Though the inclusion of a happy ending is not one of the censor's stated stipulations, this scene will come back into play when *The World*'s ending is considered.

In *Platform*, many of the main characters' greatest troubles can be linked to the Party's political action or inaction. Despite their best efforts to break free, they are at the mercy of greater influence and can't rise above from their actions alone. This portrayal of the Party as being against the people instead of for them, and even pointing at particular historical occurrences like the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the one child policy with a criticizing air, was unquestionably affronting to the censors' sensibilities of political and ideological rectitude, and thus it had to be produced underground or not at all. This is inextricably linked to scope: being cut off from the official system also cut off access to assets like high-end equipment, professional studios, location privileges, and large funds with which to increase the scope of the film. Even with Jia Zhangke's award-winning reputation, the funding that could be secured from international companies was only barely enough to get the film made despite a relatively low scope. This sacrifice of production possibilities in exchange for an unimpaired narrative does not appear to be completely without censorship, however – the complete and total avoidance of explicit political statements in favor of heavily implying them but leaving the final step up to the audience brings to mind once again Pickowicz' statement from earlier: "That is to say, despite Jia Zhangke's protestations to the contrary, they willingly engage in self-censorship as the price that must be paid to make underground, private,

independent, unofficial films."[26] Even in the absence of any censor involvement, underground filmmakers do not have complete narrative freedom and must know exactly where to stop short.

ABOVEGROUND FILM AND *THE WORLD*

The second selected work of Jia Zhangke is *The World*,[27] his first film produced and released entirely within the government film system. It released in 2004 abroad but its domestic release in China wasn't until several months later in 2005. Though it also made showings in international film festivals, it did not win any awards, but it was well received by young people in China. In an interview, Jia stated that, "[*The World*] didn't do too well theatrically, but DVD revenue is pretty good. We sold more than 300,000 legitimate copies… The film has been quite well received by university students, who contributed in-depth critiques to various web sites which generated insightful analysis."[28] The international release has a 139-minute runtime[29] while the Chinese release has a 96-minute runtime[30] – a reduction of about forty minutes, or about thirty percent of the film's runtime, though some of this loss is attributed to a slightly faster playback speed. An analysis of both versions reveals which scenes were cut, providing valuable insight as to precisely which parts of the film were deemed too problematic by the censors. Before jumping right to it, however, it is beneficial to understand some of the changes

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[26] Pickowicz and Zhang, *Underground to Independent*, 6.

[27] *The World*, directed by Zhangke Jia (2004; New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2005), DVD.

[28] Shih, "Life and Times," 57.

[29] *The World*.

[30] *Shijie [The World]*, directed by Zhangke Jia (2004; Guangzhou: Beauty Culture Communication, 2005). DVD.

that occurred within the Chinese domestic film industry in the early 2000s between the releases of *Platform* and *The World*.

This era was seen even by underground filmmakers as bringing a long-awaited softening of state control over film production, so much so that several filmmakers other than Jia Zhangke also went aboveground during this time.[31] The State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT) enacted several reforms to lessen the state's grip on the film industry, scaling back some of the rigidity of censorship rules and decentralizing their role in the industry's infrastructure. Jia himself summarized the greatest censorship changes in one of his interviews, explaining that, "… before now, every screenplay needed the censors' approval; now they only need to approve a 1500-character plot summary [before you start shooting]. Before, films were all censored by the national Ministry of Radio, Film and Television, but now you have six different regional offices with the authority to approve films."[32] Thanks to these new changes, films could be approved without the entire script being scoured and critiqued, and spreading the authority to approve films allowed for different approaches and opinions to censorship and approval. The greatest infrastructural changes were seen in two SARFT documents:

> *Regulations on the Administration of Sino-Overseas Co-Production Films*, which… provided foreign investors with greater freedom in producing films in China… *The Provisional Rules for Operational Qualification Access of Film Production, Distribution and Exhibition Enterprises*… allowed non-state film production companies to apply for

[31] Pickowicz, *China on Film*, 325.

[32] Jaffee, "Interview with Jia Zhangke."

> production licenses, a privilege that had formerly been the exclusive prerogative of state-owned studios. In addition, the sectors of distribution and exhibition were all opened to non-state film companies.[33]

With these in place, funding, production, distribution, and exhibition – essentially all aspects of creating a film other than official approval – could be achieved via non-state affiliated avenues, combining with the newly relaxed approval process to create a more open film industry.

In light of these new changes, Jia Zhangke resolved to test the waters with *The World*. This time set in the present, circa 2003, *The World* focuses on employees who work at the World Park in Beijing, a theme park that fabricates the experience of world travel by packing various miniature replicas of world monuments into less than half a square kilometer.[34] A sort of surrealness surrounds the film due to the juxtapositions it presents, such as how the world is so close yet so far away, how they are surrounded by people yet socially isolated, or how they are tired of deceit yet make their living performing charades. The main characters include Tao who is a dancer at the World Park, Taisheng who is a pleasure-seeking security guard and also Tao's boyfriend, Qun who makes counterfeit reproductions of upscale fashion brands and is also Taisheng's mistress, and Anna who is a Russian woman stuck in Beijing trying to save up enough money to visit her sister in Ulan Bator. All of these characters and several more struggle to find what they are really looking for in a disconnected world where they are all just one in a crowd.

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[33] Zhang, *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang*, 115.

[34] *The World*.

It is immediately apparent that *The World* has a much larger scope than *Platform*. Thanks to the opportunities afforded via working through the official system, the movie was able to be filmed in the actual World Park itself. Scenes take place within the replica Eiffel Tower, on the park's monorail, in the back rooms, and on the elaborate sets used for the park's actual performances. Several large-scale choreographed dance performances are included, complete with fancy themed costumes and stage lighting. There are even multiple instances of flash animation used in the film to highlight scenes with important text messages, which certainly required hiring a separate, specialized animation team. Scenes with horseback riding imply the involvement of animal trainers, and a scene where a man's clothing actually catches on fire doubtlessly required an on-set safety team to put it out after the scene. Unlike *Platform*, there are far more moving shots and an original music score punctuates many scenes. Jia still makes use of his signature long takes, but shots of varying length are included as well. There are some small caveats that present themselves along with these increased opportunities, however. A shot of the replica Great Pyramids is overlayed the World Park's slogan and website URL, one of the opening scenes features a character advertising new Motorola phone models in plain conversation, and more than a few discernable logos are present on various products in the background of some scenes over the course of the film. Product placement in film is hardly a case unique to Chinese cinema, but it is still another noteworthy example of the sort of additions to a script that a filmmaker would not include unless influenced to do so by the entailed increase in scope.

Among the scenes that were cut from the mainland China release were those focusing on the characters Bing, Youyou, and Erxiao, as well some scenes with Anna. All of these characters are tied to controversy in one form or another, and the cuts made by the censors either alter the

portrayal of these controversies or remove them altogether. To start with, Bing, Qun's brother, is a troubled youth always looking to borrow cash. His introduction scene is cut short just before he is asked, "Spent it all on girls or gambling?"[35] Qun's introduction was cut before she arrives, where she is seen talking to their eldest brother who says, "[Bing] plays mahjong all day. He's out all night chasing whores."[36] One line referring to Bing's gambling habits was kept in the film, but these lines referencing that he solicits prostitutes were removed, confirming a bias of the censors. This is rather intriguing because a scene where prostitution is heavily inferred was still included later in the film. It begins in the women's bathroom in an upscale club where a woman in a revealing party dress is coughing up into the sink before another woman hands her a stack of bills. Paired with this monetary exchange is a verbal exchange implying payment for services from an absent third party: "[A:] This is for you. [B:] Have they gone? [A:] Yes."[37] While using the sink, Tao recognizes Anna when she enters, wearing a similar revealing party dress, but their reunion is cut short. Struck with the realization that her friend is prostituting herself, Tao begins crying, and Anna runs away before she begins to cry as well. Though this scene is clearly depicting the business of prostitution, it was included in full, unlike the scenes that merely mention prostitution. The difference lies in that the depiction is implied while the mentions are explicit – there is plausible deniability that the women were being paid for something else, or that Tao was crying about something else, though the audience knows otherwise. This acceptance of the implicit and rejection of the explicit, regardless of depictive severity, demonstrates that censors are willing to tolerate a 'show, don't tell' workaround

[35] Ibid.
[36] Ibid.
[37] Ibid.

reminiscent of *Platform*'s inability to directly critique the Party despite depicting plenty for the audience to infer from.

Youyou is a fashionable young woman and one of Tao's fellow dancers at the park, but she was cut out of the film almost entirely. The primary significance of this stems from a scene where Tao happens to see Youyou out on a date with Park Director Mu, a balding late-middle-aged man who runs the Beijing World Park that they all work at. Youyou tacitly asks Tao not to say anything about it, and Tao reassures her that she won't. Later, Park Director Mu announces to the troupe that Youyou has been promoted to troupe supervisor, clearly due to their fling. Other unrelated scenes with Youyou in the middle of the film were cut as well, such that in the final domestic version Youyou only stars as a dancer in the beginning and once at the end where she is now troupe supervisor, and this change goes unexplained. The removal of Youyou's controversy also thematically connects to a separate scene of a karaoke party in the aforementioned upscale club where Tao has been invited along with other young women to accompany some wealthy guests. In a cut line, it is stated that, "Our guests are big businessmen."[38] Though the rest of the scene showing one of them trying to seduce Tao with offers of securing her a passport and luxurious trips was not cut, this leaves the identity and stature of the men ambiguous. Taken together, it is apparent that one thing that the censors were wary of was the depiction of corruption in the ranks of the elite, who use their influence for personal pleasure and to toy with subordinates.

Erxiao is Taisheng's cousin who also works as a security guard at the Beijing World Park ever since Taisheng lined up a job for him there. He was also removed almost completely, even

[38] Ibid.

innocuous scenes such as him pouring hot water for a fellow employee are missing from the Chinese release. This is due to a scandal late in the film where it's revealed that while the performers are onstage, he roams the halls going from purse to purse, nonchalantly snatching inconspicuous amounts of loose bills as if it's a regular occurrence for him, but he ends up getting caught. Taisheng confronts him and asks if he really did it, and when he remains silent Taisheng slaps him across the face and berates him. Erxiao gets fired, and Taisheng drags him away to send him home. Thievery alone doesn't appear to be the issue, as *A World Without Thieves* also cleared censors and released earlier in 2004 despite having many characters – including the protagonists – cast as professional thieves.[39] These discarded scenes don't seem too problematic then, merely showing someone's misdeeds and subsequent punishment, but they may have been targeted for removal due to the depiction of someone in a position of authority misusing their power, similar to the omittances with Director Mu and the businessmen in the club but on a smaller scale. The scandal could be amplified through a thematic lens as well: if the World Park represents the world at large, then a corrupt security guard could represent corruption in the police force, a connection that the censors would not want the audience to make.

Most of Anna's scenes were included intact, but three in particular have vanished. In the first, shortly after all of the Russian dancers arrive, the man who brought them to Beijing collects all of their passports for safekeeping, but he is never seen again. Anna's troubles after this point indicate that he left them all stranded without passports, but in the absence of this scene it appears that Anna's troubles are due to her own choices and she could leave at any time. In a

[39] Zhang, *The Cinema of Feng Xiaogang*, 136.

later scene, Tao and Anna are together when Anna's jacket falls from her shoulders, revealing an assortment of strikes and bruises across her back, though the rest of her body is clear, informing the audience that she is being subjected to domestic abuse wherever she is staying in Beijing. The elimination of this scene again removes indications that Anna's troubles are caused and perpetuated by other people taking advantage of her, leaving in their place an image of personal responsibility for her situation. Lastly, there is a scene where an airplane flies overhead and Tao remarks that she doesn't know anyone who has even been on a plane. That part made it in, but the next shot was cut: a shot depicting Anna on the plane, having fulfilled her wish to save enough money to go visit her sister. Without this scene, the audience is left to believe that Anna's story ends with her remaining a prostitute, the culmination of what appears to be a series of her own bad choices. Gone is the context that she was betrayed and beaten, and though she despised prostitution it was her only ticket to escape her prison that was Beijing. These particular cuts by the censors show that they were not entirely averse to Anna's character, but they were very careful about what the audience would interpret from her situation. They did not want to portray Beijing as a city cruel to foreigners, they did not want to portray unfavorable circumstances as being beyond an individual's own responsibility, and they did not want to portray prostitution as an avenue that leads to success in any measure. In order to attain this, they disposed of the realist depiction of Anna who is pushed down and fights her way back up and replaced her with a cautionary tale version of Anna that squandered a promising life and slid into a downward spiral.

With removed scenes covered, it should also be noted what other possibly controversial scenes made it into the film untouched. For instance, scenes dealing with affairs weren't toned down even when it would have been simple to do so. Scenes where Taisheng tries to kiss Qun,

where she kisses his cheek, and where she explains that she is married could have been cut with the general context that they are having an affair still remaining, but these scenes were left in. Even though the censors cleared the scene where Anna is implied to have become a prostitute, they didn't remove an earlier scene where she shows Tao her wedding ring and pictures of her children, which they could have done if they wanted to avoid additional affair-related content. Similarly, scenes with stronger sexual content than *Platform* dared to depict were included uncut. Taisheng and Tao aggressively making out, a quick bra shot, and clothed groping were included. There is even a scene where Tao, wearing pajamas, is lying on top of Taisheng, wearing only his briefs, in a hotel bed. She stretches his waistband and takes a peek inside his underwear, then gets up and closes the curtains, heavily insinuating a sexual encounter. These examples show that even explicit portrayals of affairs were now deemed tolerable, as well as heavy romantic actions just shy of actual intercourse, though dialogue or depiction of sex itself must remain an implication, even if obvious.

In a scene depicting a minor crime, a friend asks Taisheng if he can secure him a second ID card in order to open a second phone line under a new number so people will call him back, and when Taisheng manages to get him one he even remarks, "Even with anti-forgery marks! They look real."[40] The decision to leave these two small scenes uncut shows an interesting difference in censor judgement when compared to Erxiao's theft. This is still a depiction of a crime committed by a security guard, but unlike Erxiao's theft it was a victimless crime, it was performed off-duty as a citizen, it did not involve abusing special authority or privileges, and the reasoning behind it was explained in a relatively harmless manner.

[40] *The World*.

Another scene takes place in a hospital after the avoidable death of a character involved in a workplace incident. Working both days and nights at a construction site to save money, one of Taisheng's friends ends up in the hospital after a load-bearing cable broke above him. He writes his final note on the back of a cigarette wrapper, but instead of any parting words he uses his final strength to detail his remaining debts, all paltry sums totaling just 123 Yuan. Though there is not any shown contract this time, the implication here is that payment for general labor has remained just as abysmal as it had been for Sanming in *Platform*. This scene could have been cut in part or in whole, but the decision to leave it in shows that scenes critical of unsavory real-world situations and conditions are acceptable – so long as they are pointed at entities other than the Party. Despite the whole hospital scene being almost untouched, a small cut reveals this bias. A short moment where a doctor hands Taisheng a bill and he storms off to the payment counter was removed, likely because it lends itself to criticism of the healthcare system, a national issue.

Finally, *The World*'s ending is at first even bleaker than *Platform*'s: Tao tries to end her life via an intentional gas leak, and Taisheng unwittingly joins her. They are assumed to have perished, but one final voiceover is heard after the fade to black: "[Taisheng:] Are we dead? [Tao:] No. This is just the beginning."[41] This odd addition that seems to soften the blow of the ending stands out when Jia was fine with a harsh ending in *Platform*, but a quote he gave in an interview hints that it may have been an addition requested by the censors:

> This is also an issue I brought up with the Chinese censorship board. They were particularly upset by the young Chinese directors who portrayed sadness and pain on screen... I'm willing to pool all my resources as well as spirit to tell these sad stories. By

[41] Ibid.

> watching this imperfect world, we can become stronger and more optimistic of change. The censorship board failed to see it through this perspective.[42]

Including this line that explicitly states that they are not dead – though it is ambiguous whether this is via recovery or rebirth – and that a new beginning awaits them leaves the audience with questions and curiosity as the credits roll, whereas a simple fade to black after the homicide-suicide (or perhaps double suicide) would leave the audience pondering sadness and pain.

All in all, each step forward in what the censors were willing to allow to be portrayed was met with a compromise of an element they wanted removed or changed. Elaborate implications of prostitution, content relating to affairs, varying modes of undress, non-explicit sexual content, an act of minor crime, and criticisms of working conditions were all authorized to be depicted – great steps forward considering the previously mentioned 1997 regulations had explicitly discouraged the majority of these. But, in turn, concessions were made such as cutting scenes that depicted explicit mentions of prostitution, corruption in elites or officials, Anna's helplessness and final escape, and an implication of dissatisfaction with the healthcare system. Unlike *Platform*, no overtly political content was presented, but prominent and troubling social themes were allowed, for which the audience may make their own political connections as to how they arose. Though the similarities between the international and domestic versions of *The World* illustrate a relaxation in censor interference in line with the new policy changes, the differences between them call to attention that the censors still have the final say and exercise their right to cut and reshape the narrative when they deem necessary. However, in exchange for handing over the reins in these matters, filmmakers are granted funding and other assets valuable

[42] Shih, "Life and Times," 58.

to production that allow for greatly expanded possibilities, as is readily apparent from comparing the scope of *The World* with that of *Platform*. There is one more concern to this compromise though: availability to domestic audience. For Jia Zhangke, this was the most important consideration:

> My first three films all failed to pass the Chinese censorship board and weren't permitted to screen in China. This has pained me deeply. My films are about the Chinese, our lives and emotions, yet they can't be seen by us. It's like shouting out loud on the mountain, and there is no echo. It feels very empty… my films have been recognised internationally, yet, these positive responses can never replace the feedback of the Chinese audience. Their non-existent comment could not generate any kind of cultural dialogue.[43]

More valuable than legality, fame, and economic circumstance was the cultural dialogue he could generate as an artist – if his works could not be widely seen in China, they could not be widely discussed in China, and where there is no discussion there is no change. It was for the sake of sparking such dialogue that he allowed the cutting edges of his social narratives to be tempered by censors.

THE CURIOUS CASE OF *A TOUCH OF SIN*

As seen with *The World*, even a film that has cleared pre-censorship approval for starting production can encounter post-censorship interference wherein scenes are cut from the final

[43] Ibid., 57.

domestic release. Jia Zhangke's 2013 film *A Touch of Sin*,[44] however, made for an interesting extreme case wherein it was initially approved and even given a release date but was then prevented from release altogether. Conceived, funded, and produced all within the official system, it was then treated as though it were an underground film when it came to distribution. In this light, this highly unusual phenomenon can be seen as a sort of middle ground between the two approaches to analysis taken thus far, situating itself as one final consideration that mustn't be ignored.

Jia Zhangke began working on *A Touch of Sin* after learning more about the regularity of violence in China. The contents of the film were inspired by true cases that were given little or no attention in official news reports but came to light via the social networking website Sina Weibo and went viral due to their violent and shocking nature.[45] In the film, the first part follows Dahai, a worker at a coal mine who is at the end of his rope trying to correct widespread corruption that has left his town and fellow villagers destitute while the mine owner continuously flaunts his unscrupulous wealth with extravagant purchases like foreign sports cars and a personal jet. Having exhausted every method of doing things the right way and making less than zero progress, he eventually reaches his melting point and takes justice into his own hands by gunning down the corrupt and complicit with a hunting shotgun. The second part follows San'er, a man with profound ennui that only finds excitement in discharging firearms. With no pretense of righteousness or justice, he assassinates random well-to-do strangers for fun and steals their belongings to fund his lifestyle. The third part follows Xiaoyu, who is beaten with fistfuls of cash

[44] *A Touch of Sin*, directed by Zhangke Jia (2013; New York: Kino Lorber, 2014), Blu-ray.

[45] Olivia Geng, "Jia Zhangke Explains Why Censors Are Scared of His Award-Winning Film," *The Wall Street Journal*, March 13, 2014, https://www.wsj.com/articles/BL-CJB-21107.

by a corrupt local official demanding sex while working at her job at a night sauna. The latest in a string of stressful occurrences, her fight or flight response engages when she realizes she has a small fruit knife and she slices and stabs the man until he dies. The final part follows Xiaohui, a young man whose circumstances take him from one place to another and from job to job, where every silver lining is met with an insurmountable cloud. Realizing that one by one the things he's counted on in his life have disappeared only to be left with no friends, no assets, and no hope, he commits suicide by jumping off of a residential building.

The scope is clearly much higher than that of *Platform* or *The World*. *A Touch of Sin* reportedly had a budget of, "$4 million… the largest of Mr. Jia's movies, with two-thirds of the financing coming from domestic companies,"[46] reflecting its officially sanctioned production as well as Jia Zhangke's rising domestic eminence as an official filmmaker. This is most notably seen in how the film is rife with professional special effects and realistic computer-generated imagery for the many scenes of bloody, violent carnage. Aside from *The World*'s short animation segments, all of *Platform* and *The World* completely relied on cheaper practical effects. Filming also required an extensive amount of travel as the script entailed scenes that took place across four separate regions of China. Scenes that closely follow moving vehicles, that show an explosion, that involve expensive cars and a private jet landing, and that present dressed-up synchronized marches of women in a hostess club all speak to a high production value as well.

In terms of controversial content, *A Touch of Sin* has it all. Going back to the 1997 regulations, the censors' foremost concerns with film are depictions of sex, extramarital affairs,

[46] Edward Wong, "Filmmaker Giving Voice to Acts of Rage in Today's China," *The New York Times*, September 13, 2013, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/14/world/asia/filmmaker-giving-voice-to-acts-of-rage-in-todays-china.html.

violence, superstition, and political and ideological rectitude. For sex, *A Touch of Sin* explicitly mentions prostitutes and sex work, portrays the prostitutes in a hostess club in skimpy clothing, and even depicts one licking a man's bare chest. The extramarital affair content goes even further than Taisheng and Qun's fling in *The World* and extends to the point where an affair approaches the point of flared tensions and the possibility of divorce, as Xiaoyu is involved in an affair with a married man whom she gives an ultimatum: either divorce his wife so that he and Xiaoyu can start a family together, or cut off the affair once and for all. It goes even further with an encounter between Xiaoyu and the wife in which Xiaoyu is slapped and berated before the wife sends hired thugs to beat her. Violence is the name of the game in *A Touch of Sin* – shotgun blasts to the face, bodies bleeding out, wanton death from pistol fire, knife stabs and lacerations, spurting blood, a hand caught in textile machinery, Xiaohui's fatal contact with the ground, and more are all depicted fully onscreen with lingering shots, giving each a sense of real, deadly gravitas. Superstitious content would include San'er performing a prayer ritual to his victims, a roadside vehicle claiming to possess holy fortune-telling snakes, statues of Buddha, and lines mentioning Buddhism, karma, and reincarnation. Finally, political and ideological rectitude is continuously attacked with constant depictions of economic and moral corruption in businessmen, local officials, elites, and of course average people themselves, though this corruption is of course never depicted near the state level.

The full story surrounding *A Touch of Sin*'s soft ban is still very much behind the scenes even to this day, but over the course of multiple interviews Jia Zhangke has made statements that tell a partial story. In an interview released before the soft ban, it was stated that:

> After submitting a cut to the state film censorship panel, Mr. Jia waited about three weeks before getting a response. He got two pages of required changes and recommendations…

> He said the requests were surprisingly light. The mandatory changes pertained to some snatches of dialogue that censors deemed too coarse, Mr. Jia said. In a list of recommended changes, the censors said the film could do with less violence. Mr. Jia pushed back in a written response, and the censors backed off…[47]

So far, all was going well. Jia Zhangke complied with the mandatory changes and successfully contested against toning down the violence. After some back and forth, the film was officially approved and given a domestic release date. However, the day came and went in total media silence. Later, a leaked directive would reveal that, "… the Communist Party's Central Propaganda Bureau… ordered Chinese journalists not to write or comment on the film."[48]

In a later interview, Jia Zhangke admitted that ever since the soft ban he had been engaged in frequent back and forth talks, stating, ""In theory, it will definitely show. In reality? I talk to [film regulators] basically once every two weeks… The official side is a little anxious. [They think] maybe the audience won't be able to take it. Maybe there will be negative reactions.""[49] Despite previous official approval, the regulators backed out and did their best to make it as though the whole ordeal had never happened, but Jia was still fighting for a domestic release. Unfortunately, at some point during the protracted negotiations, a pirated version of the film had released in full and was widely circulated online, and Jia admitted defeat knowing the impact this would have on distribution even if he were able to convince the regulators to change their minds.[50]

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[47] Ibid.

[48] Wong, "No Release in Sight."

[49] Geng, "Why Censors Are Scared."

[50] Zhangke Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks out : The Chinese Director's Texts on Film* (Los Angeles: Bridge21 Publications, 2015), 13.

Before, it was mentioned how progressive new SARFT policies that decentralized censorship and distribution created a more open domestic film industry. However, the *A Touch of Sin* debacle raises these into question. The fact that *A Touch of Sin* was officially approved yet later required negotiating with regulators reveals that approval can be soft vetoed. It is possible that this means that even if a film passes through one of the six regional censorship offices, the state can still intervene from higher up, negating the purpose of decentralization. In addition, sectors of distribution were also supposed to be opened up such that they could function outside of state control, and yet *A Touch of Sin* was entirely withheld from the possibility of distribution, either in theater or via physical media. This clearly demonstrates that distribution is also subject to interference from above. These policies, then, are not nearly as binding as they are made out to be, and the state can revert to full control in individual cases where it is deemed necessary.

If *A Touch of Sin* had been officially released as planned, it would have made a great argument that state censorship of film was loosening now more than ever. With a veritable excess of objectionable content, even Jia Zhangke was surprised at how few requested changes there were, or in other words, how much was deemed acceptable and would be left unscathed. But in the end, this was not the case. Supposedly fearful of audience response, regulators halted domestic distribution of the narrative in its entirety. Curiously, these fears surfaced quite belatedly, allowing for perhaps the only domestic Chinese film to be both grand in scope and yet simultaneously deemed objectionable in narrative. The perplexing turn of events behind the curtain turned what could have been a herald of a more open film industry into a harbinger of censorial uncertainty as it revealed resurfaced state control possibilities in spite of enacted decentralization policies.

CONCLUSION

It has been clearly established that the Chinese government enforces policies that impact domestic filmmakers' creative freedom. The state regulates a filmmaker's access to the domestic film industry's infrastructure on a film-by-film basis via an approval process that scrutinizes a film's narrative, wherein the film's approval or rejection hinges on what narrative concessions the filmmaker is willing to make to appease the censors. A filmmaker that relents to these changes is rewarded with all privileges implied, which entails a more ambitious final product due to infrastructural support, a greater profit due to access to the Chinese market, and the possibility of domestic cultural impact due to domestic Chinese viewers contemplating and discussing the narrative presented. A filmmaker that rejects such revisions sacrifices these privileges, resulting in an independently produced film of meager scope whose only hope of economic or cultural impact lies abroad. Creative freedom can thus be compromised either way: in the approval process, the censors have the final say and may redact and redirect the filmmaker's narrative, and in the rejection process, the filmmaker may not have access to the resources needed to achieve even the necessary minimum scope of the film and therefore have to compromise with themselves over demanding parts of the narrative.

Further elements of this relationship were seen in each of the films. *Platform*, representing the rejection outcome, showcased the plight of underground films. Granted, the fact that they are allowed to be made at all without consequence is surprisingly lenient considering that they are officially illegal, but the barriers imposed are still formidable. As *Platform* demonstrated, even an entirely underground film with no relation to the state whatsoever must toe a fine line of self-censorship when it comes to explicit political statements that could reflect negatively on the Party, but in return they are granted the ability to explore areas that would

otherwise be shunned under the official system. Regardless of how controversial or tame their content may be, however, working outside the system means that they sacrifice the privilege of accessing industry infrastructure, and thus they forfeit any chance of domestic distribution and are left to their own means of funding and production.

The World, representing the approval outcome, demonstrated through its two versions the elements that censors found objectionable and presented the interesting distinction that explicit references to objectionable content were censored more than implicit references even when the implicit references were more strongly portrayed. However, even though aboveground films like *The World* may have scenes cut by the censors, the content that they are allowed to depict – so long as it remains an implication – is less restrictive than at first anticipated from stated regulations. In return for leaving certain things unsaid and relinquishing control of the final cut, aboveground movies enjoy infrastructural support throughout their production and may be released domestically.

A Touch of Sin peculiarly falls between both outcomes, and illustrated that the state can choose to resume direct control of the film industry when it deems necessary even though current policies supposedly prevent this. While decentralization reforms were appealing on the surface, this incident brings into question the extent of their actual authority, and casts suspicion on the legitimacy of any regulation aimed at reducing the influence of the state in film industry affairs when they can apparently be bypassed with little consequence. It should be noted that this was a rare and unprecedented situation, and that the vast majority of films still complete the approval and distribution process as intended in a more decentralized fashion, but the possibilities it brought to light are significant nevertheless.

Together these films help to form a larger picture of the relationship between the state and the Chinese domestic film industry. All of the elements considered continue to reveal aspects of government control of creative freedom in film, but a fair portrayal of the state of affairs also acknowledges the concessions that keep it from being an environment of total restriction. Underground films are alienated, but not prosecuted. Aboveground films have content censored, but implications can make it through unscathed. The state can circumvent reforms, but they seldom do so. The recognition of such distinctions in conjunction with the accompanying restrictions goes to show that, while narrative censorship is an undeniable facet of Chinese domestic film, it is not all-encompassing and the state is willing to compromise in some areas.

In the introduction, the claim was put forth that Chinese government policies towards their domestic film industry constrain narratives in exchange for enabling greater scope, and the evidence attests to this. Narrative and scope, what filmmakers have the allowance to depict and what filmmakers have the means to depict, are both regulated by government policy, and the differences between underground films and aboveground films demonstrate the inverse relationship between them. While this is all true, it has been seen that there is an additional element of such importance that it should not be left out of the final claim: the domestic audience.

The film industry is a coin with economy and culture on either side. While scope is a major incentive for the economic aspect of the film industry, domestic distribution is likewise a significant concern for the cultural aspect of it, as has been seen through each of the films' relationships to the domestic audience. The state's own perceived significance of audience availability is readily apparent in how they draw the line at distribution – they did not take issue with *Platform* or *A Touch of Sin* being produced, but they did take issue with them being

distributed. As mentioned prior, Jia Zhangke's aboveground shift starting with *The World* was primarily motivated by audience availability as well, his desire to use film to create domestic cultural dialogue outweighed other factors including inevitable censorship. The aim of filmmakers to influence cultural change by presenting narratives is matched with the aim of the state to prevent cultural agitation by prohibiting or altering narratives, a tension that speaks to the significance of the domestic audience in the struggle for creative freedom in film.

With this in mind, the claim should be revised. In order to reflect on the dual importance of both the economic and cultural potential of film and how they are used as leverage within the system, the claim is put forth that Chinese government policies towards their domestic film industry constrain narratives in exchange for enabling greater scope and allowing domestic distribution. The significance of this government constriction of creative freedom begets further considerations, however, and multiple avenues for continued or branching research yet remain, some of which shall be brought forth in these final pages to inspire further scholastic pursuits.

One approach would be to conduct a similar but broader and more longitudinal study of changes in Chinese film censorship over time in relation to the prevailing political attitudes of the times in question. For example, how has the Chinese political climate affected their film censorship policies and practices over time? With the analysis of *The World*, it was seen how content that previously would have been considered objectionable was later deemed appropriate. Such decisions are not made arbitrarily, and a deeper look at contemporary political shifts could reveal why such changes in policy and practice came to be. Continuing to analyze the films of various eras in the same way could provide data illuminating apparent trends and which among them are due to causation and which are simply correlation – as well as what such trends might imply for the present and future circumstances of China's film industry.

Another approach would be to consider the base question from the perspective of another country. For example, how do American government policies impact their domestic film industry? A noteworthy concern here would be the Department of Defense's influence over big-budget action flicks and war films. Though cooperation is optional, many filmmakers flock to have their scripts reviewed and accepted by the Pentagon, which can entail narrative changes and rewrites, in order to increase their scope with military aid.[51] This can include permission to film in military locations, access to military vehicles from trucks and helicopters to airplanes and warships, and the provision of actual soldiers as extras in order to avoid paying the rates of unionized actors. Phil Strub, the former 'entertainment liaison' in charge of this process, freely stated that it was all about 'exploiting' films to make the military look good: "The relationship between Hollywood and the Pentagon has been described as a mutual exploitation. We're after military portrayal, and they're after our equipment."[52] Such research would also benefit from incorporating key findings about China's film industry in a comparative fashion. Both examples involve constraining narratives for increased scope, but each has their own unique considerations that could present new insights when taken together.

An additional approach would be to go beyond looking at other countries and how they compare to China to take a look at how China directly affects other countries' film. For example, how do Chinese government policies toward their domestic film industry impact the American film industry? As the current largest box office in the world, the economic value of putting a movie on Chinese screens is enticing for Hollywood producers, but there are some particular

[51] Aly Weisman, "One Man in The Department of Defense Controls All of Hollywood's Access to the Military," *Business Insider*, March 5, 2014, https://www.businessinsider.com/phil-strub-controls-hollywoods-military-access-2014-3.

[52] Ibid.

hurdles in the way beyond just making it past the censors. The Chinese government enforces a quota that limits the number of accepted foreign films to just 34 films each year, and those that are accepted are subjected to a revenue-sharing system that is skewed in China's favor.[53] Despite this, the return on investment is still a bountiful net gain if the films are accepted, which invites Hollywood to play China's game in hopes of securing a spot among those 34, which may involve self-censorship to avoid the trouble of negotiating with the censors. In addition, "Producers can get around the quota system by entering into a co-production agreement with a mainland partner, an arrangement that can also facilitate government approvals, favourable release dates and promotional opportunities."[54] As transnational collaborative efforts, these co-productions allow Chinese companies to be equally involved in the entire process of production, and thus unlike imported films their direct influence can extend to the international release of such films as well. A study of these transnational phenomena would provide valuable reflections as to how China exerts influence beyond its own borders within the global film industry.

Looking further into the ties between narrative and cultural influence presents yet another approach. For example, how do Chinese policies towards their domestic film industry impact Chinese culture? It has been seen how the state's control of approval, scene removal, and distribution allow for only constrained narratives to be made available to the general public, but an unexamined aspect of this is what actual results it may have on a social scale. Though there are many avenues for such a broad question, one way this can be examined is in the particular success of domestic genre films in China. Instead of only needing to appeal to the free market, films in China must also appeal to the state, and the winning compromise is to make genre films

[53] Michael Curtin, "What Makes Them Willing Collaborators? The Global Context of Chinese Motion Picture Co-productions," *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture & Policy* 159, no. 159 (2016): 64.

[54] Ibid.

that are both entertaining to audiences and ideologically docile. Comedies[55] and martial arts films[56] in particular enjoy resounding success thanks to their ability to engage audiences while steering clear of anything that would concern the censors. Such tame films thus enjoy a greater significance in Chinese popular culture thanks in part to the environment shaped by government policies. Examining this and other effects resulting from film industry policies in further detail could reveal in what ways the government's endeavor to keep the public isolated from subversive content has impacted culture in China.

No matter the direction taken, continued research building upon these findings will undoubtedly contend with many topics of social importance and generate worthwhile discourse whether the focus is political, economic, cultural, or beyond. Even alone, these findings provide an informative look at the domestic Chinese film process and concerns such as freedom of speech versus censorship and free market versus government intervention, matters that will certainly increase in relevance as the global economic importance of the Chinese box office tests its mettle in the top spot. As for Jia Zhangke, despite the struggles of making social commentary films in a restrictive environment, he has no thoughts of stopping nor of changing his style to cater to the censors. "People have advised me to shoot a film that ends with the world getting better. It's such a strange suggestion. I like to shoot the rain. Why do you want me to shoot the sun coming up? That's a completely different thing."[57]

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[55] Yingjin Zhang, *Chinese National Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 281.

[56] Su, *China's Encounter with Global Hollywood*, 144.

[57] Geng, "Why Censors Are Scared."

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