

*A World without Thieves: Film Magic and Utopian Fantasies*

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Should we get serious about *A World without Thieves* (tian xia wu zei), with two highly skilled pickpockets, Wang Bo (played by Liu Dehua) and Wang Li (Liu Ruoying), risking their lives to protect both the innocence and the hard-earned money of an orphan and idiot who does not believe there are thieves in the world? The answer is yes, not because this film is a success in the popular entertainment industry but in spite of it. To Feng Xiaogang's credit, the film allows the viewer to feel the pulse of contemporary Chinese cultural life and to express a deep anxiety about modernization. In other words, this production by Feng Xiaogang to ring in the year of the roster merits our critical attention because of its function as art to compensate for the harsh reality of a capitalist market economy driven by money, profit, greed, and individual entrepreneurial spirit, things of little value in the old ethical and religious traditions. The title is almost sinisterly ironic, considering the national problem of corruption and crime that often threatens to derail economic reform in China, although it may ring true for those optimists clinging tenaciously to the old moral ideals, from Confucians to communists, who have always cherished the utopia of a world without thieves. Even during the communist revolutions that redistributed wealth and property by violence and coercion, that utopian fantasy was never out of favor or discouraged; during the Cultural Revolution, people invented and bought whole-heartedly into the myth of Lei Feng (directed by Dong Yaoqi, 1963), a selfless PLA soldier and a paragon of socialist virtues, who wears socks with holes but manages to donate all his savings to the flood victims in a people's commune. The key to the commercial success of Feng Xiaogang's films seems to lie in his ability to mix popular entertainment with moral idealism at the expense of economic laws. His films succeed in helping the viewer suspend their disbelief while keeping the appearance of a reality dictated by money and power. So, we are talking about stuff as serious and important as the literary tradition of critical realism in which Balzac and Mao Dun critiqued the developments of bourgeois capitalism.

Thematically, Feng's production belongs to a body of films that have used movie magic to blur the line between reality and fantasy and rendered ambivalent China's response to a global capitalism, which seems to have uprooted people from their moral values. Zhang Yimou's *Not One Less* (1999) is a tear-jerking docudrama about the problems of rural China that bar millions of poverty-stricken children from getting a basic education in literacy. His *Happy Times* (2002) creates a socialist oasis in the midst of a money-hungry society, in which an unemployed worker, with a heart of gold and support of his friends, come to care for a blind girl abandoned by her stepmother. Overtly didactic, *Shower* (directed by Zhang Yang in 2000) presents a situation for a successful businessman to quit his lucrative job in order to return to his dying father and to care for his retarded brother, both working

in a public bath-house, a symbol of purity and collective consciousness. *Pretty Big Feet* (directed by Yang Yazhou in 2002) enshrines a rural woman, widowed and childless, who works tirelessly to improve the chance of children in her village to have an education that she herself never received. *Nuan* (directed by Huo Jianqi in 2004), explores the guilt and nostalgia of a young man who, after finishing college and taking up a job in the city, returns to his home village to visit his first love, whom he abandoned after she was crippled, a perfect sequel to his earlier piece *Postmen in the Mountains* (1998), a story of a young man's initiation into his father's idyllic world as a postman regularly traveling hundreds of miles in China's backwaters still untouched by the spread of urban developments. The romantic view of rural China and primitive conditions, free of thieves and greed, cannot exist without being implicitly or explicitly critical of the contemporary emphases on money and material wealth, made evident in films such as *Ermo* (directed by Zhou Xiaowen in 1994), a poignant and scathing social commentary on China's consumerism, in which an illiterate peasant woman obsessed with the acquisition of a 45-inch color TV buys it by selling her blood and noodles, only to realize that she does not understand most of what she sees on TV. Feng Xiaogang's *Cell Phone* (2004) shows how electronic gadgets intrude into people's intimate relations as if these technological devices were invented to alienate people (the central character throws his cell phone into the fire in the end as if it was possessed by an evil spirit, having resolved to quit cheating and start living an honest life). Released in 2004 and directed by Li Yang, *Blind Shaft* is a belated variation of Gogol's *Dead Souls*, offering a case of extreme moral degradation; it is a chilling story of two conmen driven by greed to murder fellow coal-miners and then collect compensation money as the relatives of the deceased.

Such is the intellectual climate from which *A World without Thieves* emerges and gathers clouds. For lack of a better word, I will characterize this Chinese attitude of as a primitivism, a romantic view of the past and at the same time a critical view of modernization as a demonic force threatening to destroy the moral fabric of an old society in transition. It is therefore little wonder that Tibetan Buddhism, an "archaic" belief in karmic retribution, becomes that which Feng Xiaogang chose to evoke to offset and contrast the evils of greed—an anxiety to get rich quickly—that the thieves represent. Part of the story takes place in a Buddhist temple in Qinghai Province where Wang Li, the female outlaw, pregnant by her partner in crime, suddenly feels the need to repent in the name of her unborn child, ("wo xiang wei haizi ji dian de"). Character root or born idiot (*sha gen*), played by Wang Baoqiang who appears previously as an innocent prey in *Blind Shaft*, offers a perfect opportunity for Wang Li to redeem herself by becoming kind, unselfish, and virtuous. The boy who works as a hired hand for renovating dilapidated temples and is on his way home with 60k which he has every chance of losing on a crowded train, given his inexperience and innocence. Yet a Buddhist miracle happens when Wang Bo, the unscrupulous criminal who steals from even the most pious pilgrims in the holy place of worship, robs the people who have robbed Sha Gen and returns

the money to its rightful owner before he dies. The story ends with Wang Li returning to this religious site after giving birth, leaving her infant to be picked up by two Tibetan women, signifying the beginning of a new life on this sacred ground, free of sins and thieves. (The scene reminds me of Raskolnikov, the main character in Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, compelled to confess his crime by the power of his girlfriend's faith in Christianity.)

The attraction of primitive religions seems to correlate directly and proportionally to the amount of dissatisfaction that modern man feels in the present, in which he often finds himself hopelessly lost in a mass society and helpless in dealing with his own anxiety. Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (1992), for example, is another exercise of primitivism, in which the absurdity of wars and revolutions that threw China into convulsion and chaos time and again seems to vindicate the worldviews of Buddhism and Daoism in which man's existence is understood as meaningful coincidences at best. Ning Hao's independent film *Incense* (Xiang Huo, 2003) also uses the story of a Buddhist monk unable to practice his religion to castigate the mass culture that is blinded by money worship. These films, while light-hearted and somewhat entertaining, serve as compensatory adjustments for social progress in which we feel increasingly disconnected from our primitive past. They seem to echo and vindicate the primitivism of Carl Jung who said, in *Modern Man in Search of A Soul*, "The biblical fall of man presents the dawn of consciousness as a curse. And as a matter of fact it is in this light that we first look upon every problem that forces us to greater consciousness and separates us even further from the paradise of unconscious childhood." As China's modern projects become more accelerated in the future, we are bound to see many more "happy" returns to that utopian world without thieves, the state of pure innocence and the origin of human consciousness.