

JUMP CUT

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA



City of Sadness employs a plurality of dialects spoken in Taiwan at the time ...



... and thus contests the formation of an official Chinese language ...

Dialect and modernity in 21st century Sinophone cinema

by [Sheldon Lu](#)

Just as China has the largest population in the world, its citizens speak a bewildering array of dialects (*fangyan*) and languages (*yuyan*). In modern times, new communication technologies such as radio and film potentially promise to speak to the ears of all citizens in the nation-state. But what language should be used as the standard for all citizens? As a modern and modernizing media, cinema could mold and unify the language of the nation. In this regard, unsurprisingly, language and dialect have been a particularly important issue in Chinese cinema from early twentieth century to the present time. Indeed, the use of a specific dialect in a film pertains to nothing less than the symbolic construction of the modern Chinese nation-state. As Chinese film historians well know, the Nationalist Party (Kuomintang, or Guomindang) in Nanjing established a film censorship board soon after its unification of China in 1927. The Republic of China stipulated that Mandarin be the *lingua franca* of Chinese cinema and banned the use of local dialects such as Cantonese. A unified China must have a unified Chinese language. As a result, Cantonese-language cinema could only be made outside the sovereignty of the Chinese nation, the



... and the establishment of a singular Chinese identity.



跳交文明女 東西南北自由志 通通給自在 世事如何說不知 自由舞
跳交知文明時代 社會會公辦 男女雙雙 舞舞一舞 跳跳步舞我上舞愛...

Viva Tonal is a documentary that grounds an indigenous Taiwanese modernity by highlighting the primacy of the Taiwanese dialect among the people at time.

island of Hong Kong.

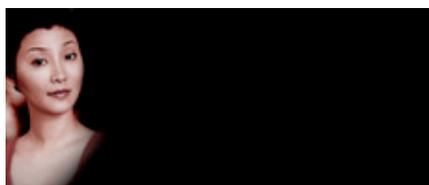
When the Republic of China relocated itself to Taiwan after the end of Japanese colonial rule, the Mainlanders who wielded power in Taiwan established Mandarin as the island's official dialect. Two parallel cinemas existed in Taiwan: Taiwanese (Hokkienese)-language cinema and Mandarin cinema. After the Nationalist Party's decline in power, and with the rise of pro-independence, separatist sentiments in Taiwan since the late 20th century, the Taiwanese dialect has gained importance in all walks of life, even in Presidential politics. Utilizing a variety of languages and dialects, Taiwanese New-Wave filmmakers such as Hou Hsiao-hsien have also consciously explored the intricacies of Chinese/ Taiwanese politics and history by featuring a variety of dialects in some of their films, most notably in *City of Sadness (Beiqing chengshi)*, where a profusion of dialects and languages: Mandarin, Hokkienese, Hakka, Shanghainese, and Japanese, are all heard. Moreover, the film's protagonist is a deaf-mute photographer who is incapable of speaking any of the Chinese/Taiwanese dialects. This situation thus further questions what ought to be the common mother tongue of Taiwan.

In the case of Hong Kong after 1949, we may also speak of two parallel cinemas: Cantonese-language cinema and Mandarin cinema. Although the dominant cinema in early days, Mandarin cinema gradually lost to the ascendancy of Cantonese-language cinema as a result of broad social and demographic changes, namely indigenization movements, or “Hong Kongization” from the 1970s onward.

In the People’s Republic of China, official film policy has dictated that Mandarin be the standard language of film despite the great variety of existing Chinese dialects within the nation. The overwhelming majority of films made in China have used Mandarin indeed. However, starting in the post-Mao era of “Reforms and



Contrary to the global connotations of the title, *The World* ironically and tragically deals with a corner of Beijing where China's vast migrant population struggles to find a niche of existence.



Openness,” a variety of film production practices have emerged, and language politics has become more diversified. The usual stipulation solely to use Mandarin is now and then ignored. Even official mainstream (*zhu xuan liu*) films depicting the lives of the country’s former leaders often use the local dialects of the particular characters. For instance, the actor for Mao Zedong speaks a Hunan dialect in the way Mao himself spoke during his life. By doing this, the actor Gu Yue established himself as a famous household name because his film character looked like Mao and spoke like Mao. In such cases, the use of local (“unfamiliar,” “quaint”) dialects creates an atmosphere of realism, or in the case of comedy, elicits audience laughter. Meantime, self-conscious arthouse filmmakers also employ local dialects to achieve specific aesthetic effects.

Outside the Chinese sovereign state (Republic of China or People’s Republic of China), the question of Chinese dialect is still a thorny issue. China *cum* nationhood may be no longer relevant, but questions of ethnicity, Chineseness, and multiculturalism loom large. For example, Singapore, an independent non-Chinese country run by an ethnic Chinese elite, its language policy, and its cinema bring up a new set of issues in the study of Chinese-language cinema.[1].[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#) Furthermore, at the turn of the twenty-first century the widespread production and circulation of Chinese-language films outside the Chinese nation-state in the diaspora and the world further complicate language politics in cinematic discourse.

This essay aims to explore the use of dialects in varieties of Chinese-language films in the early twenty-first century. I briefly examine such diverse films as

- *Viva Tonal: The Dance Age* (Taiwanese documentary 2003), which hinges on a notion of local modernity based on the



Cell Phone describes emergent social and communication problems as China enters the telecommunication age. In the film the new fetish-object among China's population facilitates communication as well as destroys old familial and martial bonds.



Viva Tonal: The Dance Age shows the modern beat in the ballroom dance hall and the Taiwanese-dialect songs

Fukienese/Taiwanese dialect in early 20th-century Taiwanese popular songs;

- a mainland Chinese arthouse film *The World* (2004) by Jia Zhangke, whose works have developed a dialectal film aesthetics based on the Shanxi dialects of Fenyang and Datong;
- Feng Xiaogang's new-year films *Cell Phone* (2003) and *A World without Thieves* (2004) where some key characters speak provincial dialects; and
- Zhang Yimou's pan-Chinese films *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), which employ a cast of stars from Greater China who all speak Mandarin.

I analyze how such films articulate distinct visions of China as nation-state or Chineseness as ethnicity. The films address different audiences and embody various conceptions of China. How a film employs specific local and provincial dialects, or does not, is an important marker of a film's cultural imaginary, be it about local Taiwanese identity, the moral economy of the mainland Chinese nation, or historico-cultural China. Overall, I lay out a spreadsheet of the typography of different dialectal strands in contemporary Chinese-language film production. These relate to identity-formation at various levels: local, national, subnational, supranational, and global.

Viva Tonal: The Dance Age and Taiwanese modernity

In 2003, Taiwan's Public Television Service (Gonggong dianshi tai) produced and broadcast a documentary, *Viva Tonal: The Dance Age (Tiaowu shidai)* about the flourishing of popular Taiwanese-language songs in the 1930s. The title of the film is taken from the title of a 1933 popular song, written by the songwriter Chen Junyu. The film documents the rise and fall of Columbia Records, which produced Taiyu songs,

Taiwanese-dialect songs emitting from the phonograph creates a bewildering hybrid modernity.



Goddess tests the boundary of tolerance in a modernizing society. Shanghai cinema embodies the hopes and desires and modern China, and travels to the rest of the Chinese-speaking world.



Although a film from the silent era, *New Woman* loudly articulates the

interviews the company's singers and staff, and broadly canvases a large sector of Taiwan's modernization under Japanese colonial rule. The documentary's narrative voice is that of a female speaking in Taiyu, southern Fujianese (Hokkienese) dialect, or Minnanese.

The narrator asserts that although citizens of Taiwan lost political rights under Japan's colonial rule (1895-1945), Taiwanese society modernized quickly. The island's infrastructure improved enormously. Railroads, electricity, tap water, and medical schools were made available to Taiwanese, and the items and icons of modern life such as bicycles, eyeglasses, watches, photography, radio, and the music record became part of people's daily life. People's consciousness underwent a modern transformation as they tuned in and sang along Taiyu songs with words such as "Ruan is a civilized woman" (Ruan shi wenming nü). The documentary valorizes the values of civilization (wenming), modernization, and freedom in the early 20th century.

In this nostalgic reconstruction of a bygone golden age of popular culture, Taiwan appeared on the same page as the metropolises of the world: New York, Tokyo, and Shanghai. The beat of the age was foxtrot and waltz. Modernizing urbanites took up as pastimes ballroom dance and drinking coffee in cafés. The phonograph became a symbol of Taiwanese modernity. The key to the commercial success of a recording company such as Columbia Records was to produce songs in Taiyu, or to translate and rewrite Japanese and Chinese songs into Taiyu songs. Linguistic determination was of paramount importance for winning Taiwan's local residents' hearts and minds.

Taiwanese politicians were quick to seize on film's relevance to promoting their political agenda. Pro-independence leaders such as ex-President Lee Teng-hui and present President Chen Shui-bian praised the

loudly articulates the aspirations, futility and tragedy of women in China's biggest metropolis Shanghai in the early half of the 20th century.



Peach Blossom: A product of Shanghai cinema, this film travels to the island of Taiwan under Japanese occupation,



film as a good example of Taiwan's independent spirit. But the documentary *Viva Tonal* itself is more nuanced. Although it highlights the importing of modern ideas and inventions from Japan, the documentary also points to the importance of modern China in the formation of the Taiwanese cultural imaginary of the times. The narrator states that the May Fourth Movement,[2] cultural enlightenment, and Chinese nationalism on the mainland exerted a strong impact on the intellectuals and cultural workers of Taiwan. Chen Junyu, a main songwriter of the period, visited mainland China and brought back Chinese songs to Taiwan. He wrote criticism in journals on such topics as the New Literature Movement, New Poetry, the Avant-Garde, and relations between Art and the Masses. Such cultural movements and intellectual inquiries united writers, artists, and critics across geopolitical divides in the pan-Chinese world of mainland China and Taiwan. After the end of World War II, for example, Chen Junyu became a teacher of Mandarin (Beijinghua) in Taiwan.

More generally, in the 1930s, Taiwanese people readily embraced Shanghai's modern urban culture and enjoyed Chinese films made in Shanghai. Films such as *New Woman* (Xing nüxing, dir. Cai Chusheng, 1934) and *Peach Blossom Tears of Blood* (Taohua qixue ji, dir. Bu Wancang, 1931) were screened to enthusiastic audiences in Taiwan. It is important to note that these films were dubbed live in Taiyu by a commentator (*benshi* in Japanese) in the theater during screenings. The versatile *benshi* in the Japanese style ably impersonated the voices of both male and female characters as well as narrated and commented on the film's events.[3] Given the audience's warm reception of Shanghai's cultural products, nevertheless they needed to understand these things in their own language and idiom. Many theme songs were composed in Taiyu for these imported silent Chinese films from Shanghai. In fact, a large number of the

... where it is watched by the local audience through the live commentary of *benshi*.



The World: The World Park offers Chinese visitors exotic performances on the stage as well as miniature simulacra of famous landmarks from around the world, ...

songs were written and released by Columbia Records. In turn, they became popular Taiyu songs throughout the island. Modern mainland Chinese culture, Japanese film convention, and indigenous Taiwanese sensibility all meet in the cultural circuits of the island.[4]

As a “treasure island,” Taiwan has been also an “island on the edge”: on the geopolitical edge of empires, on the cutting edge of world cinema, and on the cutting edge of sectors of economic and technological development.[5] And Taiwan has had ambivalent relations with Japan, China, and the West as revealed in its cinema. The golden age of Taiwanese-language songs was brought to an end by the outbreak of the Pacific War. The colonial government then forced the populace to sing Japanese propaganda songs for the war effort. But overall, as *The Dance Age* seems to imply, Taiwanese modernity is by necessity an indigenous modernity grounded in the dialect of its people. Even if it sometimes seems a borrowed foreign thing — Japanese, Chinese, or U.S. — modernity must be translated into the speech of Taiwanese people for it to take root on the island.

A migrant dancer in *The World*



... only to highlight the gap and distance between the local Chinese and their far-away objects of desire.

For the purpose of contrastive analyses of the range of Chinese-dialect films, I turn attention to another film about dance, dancers, and dialect, *The World* (Shijie, 2004) directed by Jia Zhangke, the Wunderkind of the so called sixth generation Chinese art cinema. Consistent with the usage of dialect in his previous films, Jia Zhangke made *The World* as another Shanxi dialect film. However, set in 21st-century Beijing, the film uses language in a way that connotes more than a provincial dialect; it intervenes in the mixed premodern, modern, and postmodern condition of China at large.

The film's protagonist Zhao Xiaotao is a dancer in Beijing's World Park (Shijie gongyuan). World Park consists of miniature replicas of famous sites in the world: the Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, the Pyramid, the Vatican, London Bridge, Manhattan, and so forth. It is a simulation of the world where tourists can vicariously experience foreign monuments. Zhao Tao, the principal actress, was herself a dancer from Shanxi until spotted and picked by Jia to star in his films. She also played lead female roles in *Platform* (Zhantai 2000) and *Unknown Pleasures* (Ren xiaoyao 2003).[6]



In *The World* the local and the global ...

Like other migrant workers, Zhao Xiaotao, a native of Fenyang, Shanxi Province, comes to Beijing to seek new opportunities. She dances to entertain guests in World Park in the evenings. During each show, she dons exotic, glamorous Indian costumes and performs on a huge stage along with other dancers representing various nationalities. After taking off her costume, she returns to her usual subject-position as a migrant worker trying to make a living in China's capital city.



... stand in an asymmetrical relation to each other.

Russian dancers also work in World Park. The Chinese and Russians speak little of the other's tongue. But Zhao Xiaotao bonds with a young Russian woman, Anna, and they manage to communicate despite linguistic difficulties. In the middle of the film, Anna ventures beyond her routine dances and resorts to something she dislikes to make ends meet; she becomes a worker/prostitute in a nightclub.



Outside the simulated world of the park, real living spaces are a dismal place for the people who work there. These migrant workers are displaced laborers in China's capital city. The beautiful postcard-like, postmodern simulacra of the world's landmarks in the park stand in sharp contrast to the squalid, premodern living conditions of the workers and entertainers there. The primitive is condemned to live in a narrow corner of the wide world. World Park stands as a monument



The Missing Gun is a comedy by utilizing the defamiliarizing effects of a provincial dialects coupled with ...



... the star power of China's top actors and actresses such as Jiang Wen, Ning Jing, and Wu Yujian.



Mountain Patrol, also directed by Lu Chuan,

to China's imaginary integration into the world at large, but the characters from Shanxi Province do not partake of this brave new world. They are vagrants at the margins of China's modernization. Indeed, these people are nicknamed "Beipiao jituan" (northern floating group). Such a floating population comes to Beijing to pursue dreams and look for jobs, only to be abandoned. They live in a fake realm and can only dream about catching a ride on the bandwagon of getting rich. A tragedy occurs at the end of the film, when Zhao Xiaotao and her lover Taisheng, a security officer in the park, are inadvertently poisoned by gas in their apartment. They nearly die.

The film uses a a Shanxi dialect, spoken by Zhao Xiaotao, Taisheng, and folks from their native city Fenyang. The local dialect spoken by these characters clashes with the anonymous, universal *putonghua* (Mandarin) blaring from the park's loudspeakers. The provincial dialect here connotes backwardness, lack of modernity, and incommensurability of China's poor in relation to that postmodern virtual world. These migrants stand in for vast numbers of Chinese citizens who have been left out of China's economic boom and get none of the fruits of modernization. World Park showcases the world to Chinese visitors, but behind its glitzy surface lies ordinary citizens' struggle for survival. In fact, the miniature virtual world entraps its workers and is a mockery of globalization. The provincialism of the dialect and the characters reveals that the provinces do not parallel Beijing, the capital city, and that folks do not dance to the same modern beat throughout the vast country.

In dark, rainy days, characters dream about possible happier things in life — love, friendship, partying. Flashes of hope in this film are bracketed in short, bright animation sequences — surreal, childlike, and cartoon-like fantasies which may not come true. If a loved one or friend leaves a message in a mobile phone, that seems to be the characters' sole source of

uses dialects spoken in Tibet and Qinghai to convey a sense of realism, naturalness, and authenticity.



Cell Phone: Lao Mo (Zhang Guoli), head of the TV station, speaks Sichuanese-inflected Mandarin.



Cell Phone: Yan Shouyi (literally "Strict Fidelity," performed by Ge You), is a talk-show host.



happiness. The ringing of the mobile phone thus briefly brings hope and mobility to characters caught in a quagmire. Each time Zhao Xiaotao receives a message, the film turns to animation, with hopeful bright colors. She then rushes to the site for a rendezvous with lover or friends. Dream world and harsh reality juxtapose and intertwine in the postmodern simulacrum of World Park. The private life of the dancer Zhao Xiaotao periodically goes in and out of sync with the rhythm of globalization.

The World reveals Jia's usual film aesthetic: static immobile camera, slow horizontal pans, long takes, long shots, medium shots, and absence of close-ups. By denying the spectator close-ups, the film maintains a critical distance between viewers and actor. For the ordinary viewer, the film's use of the Shanxi dialect also creates a defamiliarizing, alienating, and distancing effect. The viewer is positioned as a detached, cool-headed observer of events unfolding in the film. She/he is prompted by the camera eye to be a witness to an objective, realistic description of a Chinese world characterized by the great disparity and non-synchronicity of its citizens, entangled in the heated games of modernization and globalization.

In addition to Jia Zhangke, recently other eminent directors have used dialects in crafting their film language. The two films by the popular young director Lu Chuan are both dialect films. For example, *The Missing Gun* (*Xun qiang*, 2002) uses a dialect from Yunnan Province. The "funny" accent of the province, coupled with Jiang Wen's stellar performance, augments the film's comic flavor. *Kekexili* (*Mountain Patrol*, 2004) mixes the Tibetan language and the Chinese dialect spoken in Tibet-Qinghai, and the characters' way of speaking infuses the film with a raw, gritty, documentary, authentic feel. *Peacock*, the winner of the Silver Bear Award (Jury's Grand Prize) at the Berlin Film Festival in 2005, directed by cinematographer-turned-director Gu Changwei, uses



Cell Phone: Yan turns out to be a cheater behind the back of his wife, only to be outsmarted by a young female upstart who manipulates his libido to advance her career.



Cell Phone develops a narrative around the follies of human behavior caused by the convenience of the cell phone in our telecommunication age.

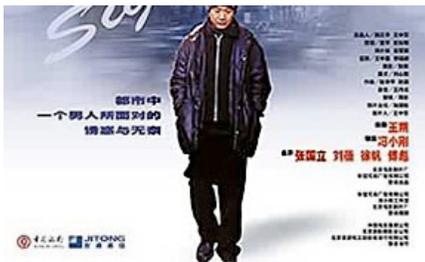


the dialect of Anyang, Henan Province throughout the film. Here, the local speech of the Anyang area helps convey the confining small-town lifestyle of an ordinary Chinese family in the mid- and late 1970s, a transitional period of Chinese history between Mao's socialist planned economy and Deng's market economy, a time that sparked both hope and desperation. When the paratrooper recruitment officers of the People's Liberation Army arrived in the town, Sister became enamored of the beautiful Beijing accent of a handsome young officer. Here, the connotation is that the Beijing dialect, as the "standard national speech," embodies the hopes and dreams of local dialect-speakers.

World of thieves and cheaters in the telecommunication age

The flashy, fast-paced film style of China's prominent commercial filmmaker, Feng Xiaogang, varies greatly from the ponderous, austere aesthetics of Jia Zhangke's dialectal art films. But local dialects also play important thematic functions in Feng Xiaogang's recent pictures. The use of the Sichuanese and Hebei dialects in *Cell Phone* (Shouji, 2003) and the Hebei dialect in *A World without Thieves* (Tianxia wu zei, 2004) produces comic effects to entertain the domestic Chinese audience on New Year Eve's in 2004-05. More important, these dialects subtly mount a social critique of China's modernization.

The 2004 new-year-picture, *Cell Phone*, takes up the themes of language, communication, surveillance, and marital infidelity. A prologue begins the film. It's 1969 in a northern Chinese village in Hebei Province, not far from Beijing. Yan Shouyi, a name that connotes "fidelity," is a would-be superstar TV talk host but here a 13-year old boy. At that time, he spoke a heavy Hebei dialect just like everyone else in the area. It was the year when a telephone line reached the village. On a



A Sigh is a New-Year Picture (hesui pian) by Feng Xiaogang, China's topic director of commercial film.



bicycle newly purchased by his father, the lad took Lü Guihua, his cousin Niu Sanjin's beautiful young bride, to the post office in order to place an important phone call to Niu Sanjin. Although a long line of peasants were waiting to make phone calls at the post office, Lü Guihua and Yan Shouyi could finally call Niu, who worked at a remote coalmine. This telecommunicational breakthrough represented a joyful day as well as a personal accomplishment for the teenager Yan Shouyi. What became evident in the prologue were Yan Shouyi's purity of heart, his faithfulness to his family, cousin, and cousin's wife, and more generally the social mores of the villagers in primitive, premodern China.

When the main story begins, a magic fetishized commodity object, a cell phone, occupies the center of the frame of the film in the opening credits. A directory section of a cell phone on screen introduces and lists the actors' names. Blatant product placements (China Mobile and others) appear from the very beginning and run throughout the film. Adult Yan Shouyi (Ge You), far from that primitive, tongue-tied, simple peasant boy, works as a glib talk host at a major television station, speaking *putonghua* (literally "universal language"). The rest of the story then develops a farce about how married, professionally successful men such as Yan Shouyi attempt to cheat on their wives with the help of cell phones. In this plot, the cell phone, with deceptively placed messages, is a major device, impeding the protagonist. It beeps, is turned on and off, and ultimately turns against its user and exposes the infidelity of the husband to his wife. There is no place to hide secrets anymore. Time has proven that the technology of the cell phone often brings people *too* close to each other. It even has the feature of global satellite positioning, which pinpoints the exact location and apartment number of the user of the phone, as demonstrated in the film. Ironically, the cell phone destroys the bonding between people and within

A Sigh directly explores the widespread phenomenon of extra-marital affairs in contemporary China.



The World without Thieves: Much of the comedy and action unfolds on a train.



The World without Thieves: Ge You in the role of Li Shu (Uncle Li), the head of a gang.

families rather than bringing them closer.

An interesting "provincial" character is the Sichuanese-speaking head of the television station, Fei Mo, or Lao Mo (Old Mo, played by Zhang Guoli, who also stars as an endearing yet compromised husband in Feng Xiaogang's film *A Sigh* [Yisheng tanxi, 2000]). Lao Mo attempts to have an affair with his female assistant but does not carry it out. He is incapable of adultery despite his secret wish, and yet he still feels disgraced and shamed once his wife finds out what he is up to. Here too, the postmodern technology of a cell phone does not help him but finally betrays him in his hide-and-seek game with his wife. The voice-over narrator tells the audience that Lao Mo quits his job at the TV station, leaves China and goes to Estonia to be a Chinese-language teacher. No further news about him is heard. What is charming about this character is the fact that he consistently speaks Sichuanese in the capital city. His provincial quality and clumsiness become his saving grace. He retains a measure of purity, and has not descended to the lower depths of sweet talkers of *putonghua* in the postmodern metropolis.

At the end the film jumps from the global village of Beijing to Yan Shouyi's premodern childhood village, with the haunting echo of the teenager Yan calling out the name of his cousin's wife, Lü Guihua. These last scenes remind people of a prior, more primitive stage of society, a time when a legendary, irretrievably strong bonding existed in a small local community. The ending thus dovetails with the prologue visually and thematically.

In Feng's 2005 new-year-picture *The World without Thieves*, the prologue to the film is an intriguing, comic episode that nevertheless sets the serious main themes of the film: money, lust, technology, and language. General Manager Liu (Fu Biao), an obese, bald, middle-aged man, studies English with a female



The World without Thieves: Hong Kong actors Andy Lau and Liu Ruoying.

tutor Wang Li (Liu Ruoying) in his luxury private mansion. Liu has a loving, caring, beautiful wife, portrayed by Xu Fan, Feng Xiaogang's real-life wife. (Xu Fan also acts the roles of a loving, suffering, cheated wife in Feng's film *A Sigh* and *Cell Phone*). Liu wants to study English in order to improve his ability in dealing with foreign businessmen. But he also wants more. He attempts to have sex with Wang Li behind his wife's back, and unbeknownst to him this is recorded by Wang Bo (Hong Kong superstar Andy Lau) with a Canon camcorder (product placement!) from a hidden position in the house. It turns out that Wang Li is Wang Bo's girlfriend. These conspiring thieves, threatening to expose Liu's infidelity, take away his expensive BMW (product placement!) as a substitute for one million yuan cash payment. The thieves use English, the corrupt lingua franca of international business, as the language of extortion. The couple drives off in the BMW and head toward remote western China, arriving at a Tibetan monastery. Thus the film begins.

The film's most hilarious and extraordinary character is a young male peasant, Shagen, (Root, or literally "Dumb Root"), a migrant worker at the Tibetan Buddhist temple, who speaks with a heavy provincial dialect. The actor, Wang Baoqiang, also successfully portrays a similarly innocent young man, who becomes easy prey for blood-thirsty predators in *Blind Shaft* (Mang jing, dir. Li Yang, 2003). Root has been hired to repair a Tibetan temple for several years. Having earned 60,000 yuan, he is eager to return to his village to build a house and find a wife. His co-workers advise him not to carry the money home because of thieves everywhere, and urge him to wire the money home, which would cost 600 yuan at the postal service. But Root does not believe there are thieves in the world.

Root's naïveté and simple manners contrast with the wiles and guiles of thieves who are now equipped with postmodern technologies of camcorders and cell

phones. While boarding the train, he announces to the crowd of passengers that he carries sixty thousand yuan with him, and challenges any thief to come out to get him. After that, two gangs onboard the same train target him for robbery. Illustrating his provinciality, Root delivers an outrageous rhapsody about manure and wolves to Wang Bo and Wang Li on the train. His words are absurdly laughable as well as authentically moving, delivered in a quaint Hebei dialect:



Feng Xiaogang: China's leading commercial director, who invented transplanted Hong Kong's genre of "new-year picture" to the mainland

"In our village, people collect cows manure. When people forget to bring their manure baskets, they use stones to mark the manure. Other people would know this manure belongs to somebody else already and would not touch it."

"In the highland where I work, I am often alone, and have nobody to talk to. I talk to wolves. I am not afraid of them, nor do they harm me. Now there are so many people on the train who come to talk to me. Wolves do not harm me. How can human beings harm me?"

Such words even move the most jaded, cynical thieves. In the world as yet known to Root, he thinks human beings and animals live in a perfect moral order. Robbery is unheard of. Ultimately, his innocence becomes his saving grace and moves the heart of veteran pickpocket, Wang Bo, who then dies in a fatal fight with the head of another gang, Li Shu, or "Uncle Li" (Ge You), all for protecting Root's money.

The crystal-clear blue lakes, green grassland, snow-capped mountains, and pristine landscape of western China, the murals inside temples, and the religious devotion of pilgrims appear all the more otherworldly to visitors from inland China, where ordinary citizens have been accustomed to lying and stealing as part of a frenetically busy consumer society. In this narrative,

Root stands as the redemptive figure in a fallen world of consumerism and theft. Shagen/Root's characterization, as the dumb figure, speaking an uncouth provincial Hebei dialect, critiques the calculating manners of urban folks in society's mindless nationwide rush toward modernization.



The World without Thieves: a ride to the premodern innocence of Tibet.

A primitive country bumpkin Shagen, or Root (Wang Baoqiang), is a saving grace in a commercialized fallen world of greed.



Shagen, Wang Li, and Wang Bo travel together on the train.

The Tibetan monastery has a spirituality that contrasts to the greed in the rest of the country

Feng Xiaogang is China's most outspoken director for commercial cinema, and this film has numerous deep-pocketed sponsors. The credits at the end of the film give a long list of rich transnational and local corporations, including Nokia, Canon, BMW, Hewlett Packet, *Beijing Morning Post*, and so on. But Feng,

from Beijing, gives eloquence in his film to a dialect speaker, the Hebei-speaker Root, a quintessential non-commercial character who articulates a vision of China caught in the shady pursuit of capitalist consumerism. The film is Feng's version of the return of China's repressed unconscious, as it were.

Admittedly, "quaint" local dialects add to the humor of the comic genre, which is intended to provide fun and entertainment after all. At the same time, local dialects often symbolize premodern, innocent forces, so that their use often indicts the woes of reckless globalization and modernization. In this case, the film has an idealist vision, as the title loudly proclaims — "there are no thieves in the world" (*tianxia wu zei*). But in terms of language use, that ideal must come to expression in a local dialect, rather than in *putonghua* or English. Still, any idealizing of provinciality in the forms of dialects in Feng's films does not mean advocating a retreat to some subnational level of identity-formation. Feng presents a general comedy based on a malaise in contemporary China, but this Beijing-based commercial filmmaker is not outlining and calling for some kind of regional independence. His use of dialect amounts to a carefully orchestrated critique of the uneven state of modernity in the Chinese nation at large.

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