

## The Negating Subject in Progressive Time: Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu*

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### Abstract

*Given the troubled history of the self in modern China and images of Successful Person dominating imagination of personhood, this paper explores how the 1990s drastic marketization impacts the process of subject formation in contemporary China. It draws on analyses of Jia Zhangke's film Xiao Wu to reveal possible modes of surviving when confronted with homogeneous empty time of consumerist culture and fractured space of postsocialist society. Homogeneous empty time creates its ideal subject--the possessive individual; at the same time, it inevitably calls into existence its negating subject. Xiao Wu, as a negating subject, embodies a time-space that is not mere legacy of the pre-modern era, but a new product of a sequence of drastic clashes with modernity itself. Xiao Wu's negation of progressive time stands not as a nostalgic longing, but as a conscious effort of bringing about a new subject without establishing the self.*

**Key Words:** possessive individual, marketization, subjectivity, consumerist time, space

### 1. Introduction

China in the 1990s saw the vehement expansion of capitalistic mode of production and the consumerist culture. The drastic structural changes triggered by market economy, globalization, unequal resource distribution create a condition in which time is in the process of hollowing out. This hollowed time can be understood as what Walter Benjamin called "homogeneous, empty time" (1968, p.263). What the regime of homogeneous empty time offers is an abstract framework of clockwork time that threatens to regulate, discipline, and reify the richness of human experience. Homogeneous, empty time creates its dominant subject--the possessive individual, who subjects time to the measurement of capital accumulation and defines self in terms of monetary gain. In China's current mindscape dominated by deceiving images of *Successful Person* and manufactured glitter of the new rich, in what ways can other modes of subjectivity continue to exist? In cinema, is there any intercepting articulation against the culture industries operating in the logic of profit maximization? I am looking at Jia Zhangke's works with these questions in mind. In this essay, I focus on Jia Zhangke's film *Xiao Wu* (1997) to illustrate how the market economy impacts subject formation in reform era China and reveal possible modes of surviving as a negating subject when confronted with the homogeneous empty time of consumerist culture and the fractured space of postsocialist society.

Jia Zhangke's films, in directly dwelling upon the everyday life and discovering the concrete time, deviate themselves from the mode of abstract cultural allegory so prevalent in the works of the Chinese fifth generation film directors such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, and Tian Zhuangzhuang. As a refreshing representative of the new generation of Chinese filmmakers, Jia turns out to be more eager to confront the real of history.<sup>1</sup> He claims that he could not disagree more with Chen Kaige's view that film should be used as a vehicle to describe legend (2007b). In many fifth generation films, Jia detects "a very clear disconnect between these films and the Chinese reality in which we were living" and therefore he told his collaborators that he wants to "express the here and the now [*dangxiang*]" in his films (quoted in Berry, 2003, p.62). A common feature of the sixth generation Chinese filmmakers born in 1960s and early 1970s is their focus on personal experience,<sup>2</sup> a focus indicative of the drastic transformation in interpersonal relations confronted by this generation.

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<sup>1</sup> Jia differentiates himself from the fifth generation filmmakers with the following statement: "In the 80s, the fifth generation filmmakers were real heroes: they managed to break Chinese cinema out of its closed little mould and try something new. But they've changed a lot: in their current films, you're no longer seeing the experience of life in China. While my way of filming allows me to describe Chinese reality without distortion" (quoted in Douhaire, 2002). Also see Jia's similar statements in Dong, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Regarding the sixth generation of Chinese films, Valerie Jaffee (2004) points out that these are generally "films with low production values that address potentially sensitive aspects of life in contemporary China" and that the term "Sixth Generation" is an "overly vague but still useful term that emphasizes the contrast between them and the better-known Fifth Generation directors (a group which includes Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige, Tian Zhuangzhuang, and Li Shaohong)."

While others might closely concentrate on expressing their own experience,<sup>3</sup> Jia Zhangke takes the personal and the everyday to capture the radical ecological disintegration in reform era China.<sup>4</sup> His films do not depict the characters as individuals embedded in a purely oppressive grand history, or as absolutely ennui-laden petty moderns trapped in trivial banality of mechanical routine life; nor do his films simply revolve around the vicissitudes of the life of individuals so as to initiate catharsis through their tragic lot, but instead focus on questioning the fundamental problematic of a social environment under drastic change so as to envisage possible modes of living and possible identities.

From the very beginning of his film career, Jia Zhangke has been documenting the impact of modernization, privatization, and commercialization on subjectivity. His hometown trilogy (*Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*) all depict how the Chinese hinterland people reexamine and reestablish their identities in drastic transition through modernization, privatization, and commercialization. In the post-Mao era, China witnessed the slackening of ideological control and people are said to enjoy more individual freedom than ever, but in reality, many of them are getting less happy because of the loss of friendship, love, trust, marital fidelity and the increase of monetary greed coupled with growing indifference in interpersonal relations. When Jia Zhangke went back to his hometown Fenyang after graduation from Beijing Film Academy in 1997, he was shocked to find that nearly everything had changed there. He wished to see some remnant of community, family care, friendship, or some bearers of his memory, but only to be disappointed by the overnight change of a revolution scale. In an interview about his film *Xiao Wu*, Jia Zhangke describes the 1990s as “an era of warlike turmoil and disorder [bing huang ma luan]” (2007a).<sup>5</sup>

In another interview, Jia also notes “a surrealist atmosphere” hovering over the entire Chinese society as the nation is rapidly transforming under “a massive unnamable force.” He remarks that this massive unnamable force brings people unprecedented pressure which leads to “plenty of strange stuff that you cannot imagine in interpersonal relations and the way to solve problems” (2002a).

### **2.1 Homogeneous, Empty Time**

What Jia refers to as “warlike turmoil and disorder” is precisely the social ecological crisis that is ongoing since the 1990s. It is not the population increase, but the way people relate to one another that has fueled this crisis. Ultimately, this ecological crisis can be traced to the mechanism of homogeneous empty time. The notion of homogeneous empty time was developed by many critics including Walter Benjamin, who is perhaps the first to put forward this notion to criticize the concept of historicist progress. As he writes in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “the concept of the historical progress of mankind cannot be sundered from the conception of its progression through a homogeneous, empty time” (1968, p.263). Benjamin argues to the effect that any criticism of the concept of historicist progress must base itself in critiquing its progression through a homogeneous empty time. For Benjamin, “history is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now[*Jetztzeit*]” (p.263).

Homogeneous, empty time views the world through an objectifying lens. By turning time into the impersonal time of physics, the outlook of the world emerging from homogeneous, empty time becomes one that is object-oriented and deprived of human touch. It is thus working in complicity with the logic of capital. As Chatterjee appositely points out, empty homogeneous time is the time of capital, “it linearly connects past, present and future, creating the possibility for all of those historicist imaginings of identity, nationhood, progress, and so on” (1999, p.131). Žižek also argues that this regime of time is the temporality of the ruling class as he sees the “uninterrupted connection between progress and domination” (1989, p.143). Their judgments find accurate expressions in the social realities of 1990s China.

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<sup>3</sup> The critic Li Tuo objects to associating Jia Zhangke with the sixth generation Chinese films. He further questions the viability of the term “diliudai” (the sixth generation). Li Tuo argues that “in some films labeled as ‘diliudai,’ what we frequently see is the influences from the so-called 1980s Chinese modernist literature. They always narrate around the inner world of the individual (loneliness, fear, emptiness, and so forth) and try to find some sort of meaning from the conflicts between the self and the world, the innermost and the reality. Jia Zhangke’s films are not in the least like this” (2007, p.23).

<sup>4</sup> In the interview with Stephen Teo (2001), Jia speaks of the destructive effect of the economic changes as follows: “It’s often said that the Cultural Revolution was a great disaster which made victims of all of us but I think the economic changes during the ‘80s were tantamount to a great revolution which is quite destructive.”

<sup>5</sup> In many of his own essays and his interviews, Jia Zhangke expressed his shock at the impact brought about by the reform era (e.g., Jia, 2000a and Zhong, 2001).

## 2.2 Misfit and Exclusion

As Benjamin exalts the “time filled by the presence of the now,” *Jetztzeit*, against the empty, quantified instant, Jia Zhangke searches for alternative subjectivities in the here and the now. As the first film of his hometown trilogy, *Xiao Wu* (1997) is such a film that registers the director’s deliberation on the simple but fundamental question: In face of the homogeneous empty time, how does an ordinary Chinese person establish his/her identity, that is, how does he or she live as a meaningful subject in a regime of time that erases and excludes all other meaning-making apparatuses? This film concretizes an individual’s confrontation with a time when friendship, love and familial affection are swept away by the objectifying law of capital. The film makes visible the intense fracture between possessive individuals’ glamorous metropolis and migrant laborers’ discolored countryside by focusing on a pickpocket’s experience of this fractured time and space.

The film opens when Xiao Wu’s erstwhile pickpocket buddy, Xiao Yong, is getting married, but Xiao Wu is not invited to the wedding. Pondering in a deep sense of loss and betrayal and striving to remain true to his own promise and his old friend, Xiao Wu brings his wedding gift to Xiao Yong, now a celebrated model entrepreneur, only to be rejected. By rejecting the gift, Xiao Yong rejects Xiao Wu’s friendship and hence his person and their shared past. The rejection also represents the enlarging gap between model entrepreneur and his inglorious old identity. To Xiao Wu, the gap is a disturbing one that erases him.

Confronted with the gap, Xiao Wu seeks solace in spending time with the karaoke bar girl Mei Mei. To learn the modern way of love, Xiao Wu exerts himself to express his love in popular love songs<sup>6</sup> and learns to stay connected with Mei Mei via a pager purchased at Mei Mei’s suggestion. As he is catching up with the modern ways, he is rejected again. Just at the point when a sense of attachment wells up in him, Mei Mei leaves him without even saying goodbye. Xiao Wu later finds out that “some clients from Taiyuan, the provincial capital, take her away in a car,” a fashionable property at that time that signifies wealth and social status, which Xiao Wu does not own. Compared with success measured by money and material possessions, his affection is deemed irrelevant and dismissible.

Disappointed by Mei Mei’s abrupt disappearance, Xiao Wu returns to his family in the countryside. He gives a gold ring, a token of his love for Mei Mei, to his mother as a gift. His family is busy preparing for the second son’s marriage with a city woman. Determined to keep up with the city’s standard of consumption, his father asks Xiao Wu (the third son in the family) and his eldest brother to chip in for the wedding expenses. In a casual conversation, Xiao Wu realizes that his ring is now fashioned as a gift to the prospective daughter-in-law. Alienated by all these, Xiao Wu finds the new logic of the market has found its way to his family, his final retreat. He returns to the city to steal again, but his pager unexpectedly goes off, leading to his arrest by the police.

## 2.3 Country and City

Xiao Wu’s experience of misfit and exclusion is symptomatic of the economic and cultural split between the city and the country intensified during the mid-1990s. The split started as China’s most urban sectors set out to measure economic advancement through its own level of integration with the global market. As the city becomes in sync with the world of global metropolises, the rest of China is suddenly cast aside by the fervor for global integration and becomes distant, irrelevant, and invisible. This process leads to what the sociologist Sun Liping (2006) calls “the fractured society” [duanlie de shehui] in which different sections of society exist in incommensurate temporalities and cannot be welded into an integrated whole. According to Sun Liping, coming side by side with city’s integration with the global trade, a new trend of resource distribution caters disproportionately to the city.

As resource congregates in the city, the gap of income and wealth widens between different social groups and between different social spaces. This urban favoritism of resource distribution stands as a paradigm change in the orientation of China’s economic reform. In the beginning years of the reform era (1978- ), the countryside mobilized its own resources for itself. These golden years prove to be short-lived. Later on, in a market economy that privileges manufactured commodities, agriculture is rendered an impossible livelihood and subsistence farming defines a pathetic existence in a consumer society that glorifies material possession.

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<sup>6</sup> The most representative one in the film is *Xinyu* [My raining heart]. Lyrics by Liu Zhenmei.

Having the countryside subordinate to the city's industrializing and globalizing goals, the new paradigm enables a small section of the population to become extremely rich overnight. The majority of the population who were benefited at the beginning of the reform era, however, are marginalized from this boom, while paying the price the reform incurred. The countryside, without its own economic pull, is reduced to a hinterland that provides cheap labor and helps absorb the city's social problems. As a result, the countryside and the small towns remain stagnant. Hundreds of millions of surplus laborers are swarming into cities. The pickpocket Xiao Wu who used to live in the countryside and the karaoke bar girl Mei Mei who comes to Fenyang from northeast China are part of this massive influx.

As an outsider coming from Fenyang to Beijing the metropolis, Jia Zhangke the director harbors deep-seated skepticism against urban culture and the modernization narrative. When he takes as his mission to observe and document the intense social transformation in contemporary China, he wants to explore ordinary people's sentiments and pains concealed in time by recording their not-so-easy-life. While the notion of "fractured society" may be an accurate sociological term to describe the transforming China, Jia Zhangke concretizes the theme of fracture or cleavage in an artistic manner. The term "fracture" in Jia's films mirrors a cry of pain in face of a "fracture of life" emerging from this city country split.

Social polarization, fracture of social space, and polarization of subjects come in tandem with one another. The fracture between the city and the country not only describes the difference of geographical locations, *Xiao Wu* reminds us that the fracture also, perhaps more importantly, involves the contention between object-oriented and human-oriented meaning-making systems and two contrary modes of subjectivities. The metropolis is not only a location, but also a way of life dominated by objects' capacity to reify human lives. Because its objective universe helps pave the ruling class's superhighway of surveillance and subjugation to every fabric of the everyday life in both the country and the city, metropolis seeks to assert its dominance in every inch of social space. Repelled by this object-oriented force, Xiao Wu holds tighter to the eroded person-centered values and incisively demonstrates that the new object-oriented value system is devoid of friendship, love, and familial affections. His attitude of disdain enables him to debunk the empty foundation of possessive individualism (Macpherson, 1962) and the market-oriented value system. His disdainful attitude makes him a negating subject with power to disturb the simulacra of object-oriented homogeneous empty time.

Even though Fenyang is but the backwater of global capitalism, the new Fenyang in the film appears to operate on the same track--abstract laws yielding regional communal judgments to central state control, culture industry granting individuals to their mass marketed personal voices, collusion between capital and power creating the new rich and the new poor, and "free trade" reducing livelihood to a linear trajectory of monetary accumulation. This distortion of social ecology is what many critics of capitalist modernity called the reduction of the life world to homogenous empty time. While the onset of market economy in China cannot merely be understood as a capitalist process, the encroachment of object-oriented homogenous empty time over human-oriented values remains a key concept that can help to articulate the contention between two conflicting modes of subjectivities.

#### **2.4 Human-Oriented and Object-Oriented**

The contrast between the human-oriented and the object-oriented mode is highlighted in a scene concerning Xiao Yong's rejection of the wedding money. In this scene, Xiao Yong sends a messenger to tell Xiao Wu that his money is not clean and that he cannot accept it as a wedding gift. Xiao Wu retorts by questioning the source of Xiao Yong's wealth, which comes from illicit cigarette trafficking and exploiting club girls. The parallel is drawn between petty crime and the sanctioned crime of primitive accumulation. The scene is punctuated by the line: "Xiao Yong asks me to tell you that his cigarette business isn't trafficking [zousi], it's called free trade [maoyi]. Opening up bars is not called 'exploiting club girls'[zuan genv de qian]; it's called entertainment business [yuleye]."

This verbal crossfire between the two figures can be regarded as an encounter between a human-oriented outlook of world and an object-oriented one. Xiao Wu's refutation against Xiao Yong bases itself on traditional structure of feelings, while Xiao Yong's defense bases itself on sentiments developed in homogeneous empty time that believes the world has its own purpose regardless of human specificities. Xiao Yong is quick enough to understand that, in the 1990s Chinese society, the particular neologism becomes the capsule of history and that such terms as "free trade" and "entertainment business" whitewash social exploitation and gloss over crimes.

For Xiao Yong, these terms stand as magic amulets because they alone are sufficient to automatically justify his dealings in cigarette trafficking and organizing covert prostitution. In this value-added naming process, crime can be comfortably framed in lofty terminology and turned into objective issues of no concern to the profiteers. While Xiao Yong sanctions himself by incriminating Xiao Wu's ways, Xiao Wu negates the value system that constitutes Xiao Yong. While Xiao Wu steals money with his nimble hands, Xiao Yong gets his money through illicit means with tacit approval from the upper powers. As Xiao Wu draws parallel between his ways and that of Xiao Yong, he helps spell out that people like Xiao Yong are thieves sanctioned by an increasingly hegemonic narrative that endorses "the progression through homogeneous empty time." The high-sounding "free trade" featured in this narrative is nothing but a pretentious attempt to retain unjustifiable privileges in a society that worships capital.

### 2.5 Production of Conforming Subjects

Homogeneous empty time is systematically reshaping the social arena, from language, media, to interpersonal relations. Its new object-oriented mode of meaning-making expands the reach of key Ideological State Apparatuses: the new media of taste, a new polite language that purges class struggle from its vocabulary, a regime of personal discipline that equates personal growth with being on track for gainful careers. One of the major means for the homogeneous empty time to perpetuate itself is through what Louis Althusser calls ideological state apparatuses, whose function is to persuade the mass or the population into accepting the dominant ideology such as that progress will always bring a bright better future than the present. As illustrated in *Xiao Wu*, they include social education system, appropriable traditions and customs, the family, political propaganda, the media, the cultural industries, and so on and so forth. Through these apparatuses, the ruling ideology functions to construct the subjectivity of individuals. In this formulation, "all ideology has the function (which defines it) of constructing concrete individuals as subjects" (Althusser, 1971, p.171). Of course, enlisting individuals into the conforming subjects by winning their consent on the ideological level is only part of the strategy of the dominant power; when consent can no longer be won, there is always the coercive force of the "repressive state apparatuses" as backup or the final resort: the army, the police, the prison system, and so forth; Xiao Wu's lot perfectly demonstrates that.

#### 2.5.1 Media and Subjection

Homogeneous empty time is driven by the engine of capital and functions through ideological state apparatuses. This regime of time is facilitated by modern telecommunication technology with television at its center to secure for itself a measure of consent from the social members. Television not only acts as a means to disseminate information but also operates as an instrument of social arbitration on what is the desirable. As a servant to power and working in complicity with the powerful, it helps shape dominant subjectivity by foregrounding certain subjects while excluding others. Furthermore, it foregrounds the desirable elements of the chosen subjects and omits the undesirable. In order to foreground the ideal subject--the modern entrepreneur, the local TV selects Xiao Yong to appear under the limelight and fashions him into a model entrepreneur, a respectable and companionable person who stays harmoniously with everyone, a philanthropist who cares about the children unable to receive school education. However, the audience never gets to know how Xiao Yong gets to be a *chenggongrenshi* [Successful Person]; furthermore, they are never told what kind of business his Hengtong (meaning: eternal prosperity) Company is dealing in. As Wang Xiaoming insightfully summarizes this kind of *chenggongrenshi* narrative as "half-faced myth" (2003), the audience is only able to see half face of Xiao Yong and the other half is always hidden from the sight.

It is Jia Zhangke the filmmaker who, through recording Xiao Yong's quotidian banal life off the TV screen and through making Xiao Wu his mouthpiece, discloses the other half: Xiao Yong gets rich through trafficking contraband cigarettes and organizing covert prostitution, and this is no secret at all to many people living in this small city, including the police chief Hao Youliang. That the media still gives eulogizing publicity to Xiao Yong is itself an indication of official endorsement of Xiao Yong's dealings. The media fashions Xiao Yong into a hero, a paragon for the mass to follow suit. The media's affirmation of Xiao Yong testifies to the process in which the object-oriented value system is unseating the human-oriented one. This works towards the social consent on monetary success as the new standard of social assessment. To create the ideal subject of the homogeneous empty time--the entrepreneur (in Chinese: *qiyejia*, as a euphemistic term for "zibenjia," the capitalist) who is capable of controlling capital and market, the media elites and the political elites are forming alliance with the economic elites.

The media magnifies the voice of the political and economic elites and imposes their views and perspectives on the mass population, regardless of their will. The media deliberately portrays the glowing side of the entrepreneur, whereas the political elites tacitly sanction the economic crime. At the moment when Xiao Yong appears before the limelight, he still has a cart of cigarettes detained by the army, but this does not look like a serious menace to him as long as he is rubbing shoulders with the police and currying favor with the media. The image of the ideal subject shall remain positive on the TV screen no matter what the subject in reality is, because what this regime of time espouses is more of simulacra that deceive than of the real that unmasks.

### *2.5.2 Language and Class*

The media's production and circulation of this simulacra and spectacle around the ideal subject of this time regime has led to a semiotic hegemony, which has a far-reaching impact on language and thought as well as other realms of life. Semiotic hegemony can be likened to the developmentalism in economic field. It is increasingly becoming a menace to other meaning-making systems by turning them invisible, irrelevant, or insignificant. Likewise, this semiotic hegemony threatens to invalidate other modes of subjectivities, in part by depriving potency from the language they use.

In creating the desired subject, the regime of homogeneous empty time aims at internalizing the legitimacy of the dominant subject. One of its strategies is to conceal the fact of class formation by depriving the language of class from the underprivileged class. It channels class consciousness into the narratives of economic development and self development. Xiao Wu's generation were in their twenties by 1997 when the film was made and they had little memory of the "class" language pervasive in the Cultural Revolution era (1966-1976). As the Chinese state shifted gear to economic development in the Reform Era since 1978, the state has been actively suppressing class-consciousness. This was also coupled with the general populace's rejection of Marxian vocabulary out of widespread aversion to the negative impacts of the Cultural Revolution era. As a result, the language that Xiao Wu is most familiar with is presumably something like Deng Xiaoping's pragmatic "Theory of the Cat" and his widely known slogan: "Development is the indisputable truth!" [Fazhan shi ying daoli]. In the absence of the class language, Xiao Wu only complains about the loss of brotherhood and about the betrayal of friendship, but he probably cannot articulate the essential truth beneath the happenings: he and his erstwhile best friend no longer belong to the same class. The pickpocket Xiao Wu can only end up in the same class with the karaoke bar girl Mei Mei.

Owing to the lack of class-consciousness, the subject turns the blame back onto the self, which creates such a situation that everyone is pitted against herself/himself for the failure in social accomplishment. Xiao Wu says that he is a "dummy" and that he is "not as capable" as Xiao Yong in making a living. Although we understand Xiao Wu's statement implies his disbelief of Xiao Yong's mode of life, we cannot underestimate the consequence of the lack of a language of class analysis. Without such a language, social opposition is being displaced into a narrative of self development. As the overall effect of this narrative of self development, the difference between Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong is accepted in a reductive manner as a difference in personality, rather than in class status.

### *2.5.3 Education and Interpellation*

Education in service of this empty regime of time constitutes another major component of the ideological state apparatuses in producing the possessive subject. It not only includes the school education, but also includes education coming from society, family, and friends. The new ideology in 1990s China that centers on pursuing wealth and becoming rich creates a power relationship which perpetuates itself through a network of social education, in addition to other channels. When it creates such a power relationship, it also creates the conditions for reproducing such form of power relations. The subjects that are interpellated and subjugated to the new ideology at an earlier stage automatically take on the role of continually educating the self as well as persuading and attracting the mass to the new ideology. Xiao Yong is confirmed of his mode of subjectivity through the prevalent congratulatory assessments from his acquaintances. Inspired by Xiao Yong's example of "xuehaole" (literally: having learned to be a good person), the police chief Hao Youliang educates Xiao Wu to learn from Xiao Yong to become a manager or boss. Xiao Wu's friend Gengsheng tells Xiao Wu that Xiao Yong is setting up a new office building west of the city gate and asks him to learn from Xiao Yong to set up some business of his own. Xiao Wu's family members (such as his sister) too, after accusing Xiao Wu of being a good-for-nothing, try to persuade him into engaging in some undertakings that are financially rewarding.

#### 2.5.4 Discipline and Punish

This time regime's production of the possessive subject also involves the process of "discipline and punish." Xiao Yong's transformation from a pickpocket to a "model entrepreneur" embodies a process of assuming a new face as well as a process of submitting to the hegemonic regime of time. This object-oriented regime of time dictates the erasure of history and memory. Xiao Wu remembers the height notches etched on the courtyard walls of Xiao Yong's home. These chronological height notches witness and register the childhood of these two close friends when they grew higher together year by year. He also remembers that in their youthful days he and Xiao Yong had braved the journey from Fenyang to Beijing with only forty-one cents with them. Xiao Yong remembers all this too, but in a changed regime of time, he has to actively forget this memory, because this shared past with Xiao Wu will not do him any good to his success as a socially recognized possessive subject. What Xiao Yong fears is that people will be prompted to remember his past identity as a pickpocket if they know the pickpocket Xiao Wu is present in his wedding party. Enslaved by this fear, he has to sacrifice his shared memory and friendship with Xiao Wu to the reality principle.

Under the sway of this regime of time, everyone is turned into a victim of possessive logic. While Xiao Wu feels frustrated over the betrayed friendship, Xiao Yong also feels helpless about the situation if he has to conform to the hegemonic regime of time to pursue his socially recognized success. Put it in psychoanalytical terms, on the ego level, Xiao Yong actually wishes to invite Xiao Wu to his wedding party, because without Xiao Wu, he feels at a loss too, which is evidenced by his sighs and his sentimental gaze at the height notches etched on the courtyard wall. Nonetheless, he decides that he has to follow the social norms. Xiao Yong's decision betrays the indifference grown out of an unfeeling and materialistic time, rather than a flaw of personality on the part of an individual character.

Xiao Wu remains an idealist that seeks to hold fast to the humanistic elements in the value system that is being marginalized in the utilitarian society. As the repeated off-screen pop song *Bawang bieji* [Farewell my concubine] suggests, Xiao Wu is implied as a tragic hero, reminiscent of the tragic Overlord of Western Chu, Xiang Yu (232 BC-202 BC), who was besieged on all sides by the Han troops before meeting his doom at Wujiang. All the other figures are tragic too, as they live in a materialistic age that turns their own pursuit of happiness into the single dimension of mere pursuit of property owning. Nevertheless, both Xiao Yong's wistful fixed look at the height notches and Mei Mei's text message to Xiao Wu (wishing him a blessed life) betray their remnant attachment with the human-oriented value system after their helpless submission to the dominant regime of time.

This regime of time exercises its control over its subjects by punishing those that are standing in its way and rewarding those that are submissive. For Xiao Wu, a price that has to be paid for standing against the dominant subject is the loss of home, both physically and spiritually. Throughout the film, Xiao Wu appears to be a wanderer on the streets, as the audience is never shown where exactly he resides in this city. Moreover, he is driven out of his parents' home in the countryside by his father because the family deems him a rebellious ne'er-do-well. As a contrast, Xiao Yong chooses to submit to the hegemonic order and returns to the spiritually fettered but stable and established life. Xiao Wu's apprentice San Tu (a nickname meaning, literally, Third Rabbit), who does not even know how to open his mouth to speak before the TV anchorperson at the beginning of the film, quickly adapts to the changed time after he learns the ways of the new regime of time. Upon Xiao Wu's arrest, he shows no hesitation in the local television interview to condemn Xiao Wu as the pest to society that should be put in jail as soon as possible.

#### 2.5.5 Simulacra and Reality

In homogeneous empty time, the simulacra will force the real to forsake itself in pursuit of simulacra, because fundamentally an object-oriented time regime cannot accept a real concrete subject. As mentioned previously, half face of the subject has to be concealed from the viewer so that the interpellation mechanism can exercise its sway. The produced possessive subject or the subject in production also has to act according to the implicit or explicit directives of the simulacra. For those subjects that submitted themselves to this regime of time, they have to listen to what the simulacra imagine them to be. Mei Mei desires to be a star aka a celebrity in the film industry based in metropolitan Beijing, even though in reality she ends up being a karaoke bar girl in the small city of Fenyang. She herself is aware that she "can never become a star even till the end of her life," but in her phone call to her mom, she has to claim that she is now in Beijing meeting a director for audition and trying her luck at becoming an actress.

It is evident that she tries very hard to change her identity to find some hope in a system that does not recognize her worth. At least she tries to give her mom solace by substituting Beijing for Fenyang and evoking the identity of the actress in place of the bar girl, since she is made to believe that in this era of spectacle ordinary life elsewhere from the metropolis does not count as good life. While the simulacra impose their definition of good life on the social imagination, the names of those karaoke bars in the Fenyang streets, such as “Great Shanghai,” “Vienna,” and “Dream Paris,” bespeak the longing of what the simulacra evokes. These names that conjure up a global imagination contrast sharply with the listless life in the small city, whose residents are urged to give up their own in search of a different mode of living under the interpellation of the simulacra.

Taking stardom as a frame of reference makes Mei Mei see the enormous gap between her expectations and what she thinks she is. The internalization of the star as a desired self image alienates her from her real self because such a notion is internalized as well: the fault is at the self, not society. The simulacra evolving around celebrity worship makes her take her real self as the one that needs to be transformed in reference to the image of the star. Her creativity is channeled into the effort of self improvement, not into efforts of making social change possible. As Yan Hairong’s (2001) illuminating discussion on the plight of the “dagongmei” [migrant young women workers] group reveals, the dagongmei’s class-consciousness and their demand for social change was displaced exactly because they are subjected to this narrative of self-development.

### *2.5.6 Consumption and Conquest*

The homogeneous empty time manufactures layers over layers of simulacra that accelerate the production of conspicuous consumers who emulate each other on the basis of appearances and images. Integrated human relations with its delicate social ecologies are being replaced by the ever new ever same rivalry of images over images.<sup>7</sup> This regime of time-space is at the core of consumerist culture, which annihilates history and memory and displaces the desire for change into commodity consumption or into the desire for conspicuous consumption.

In the 1990s, when China started to transform into a society of “durable goods consumption” from a society of “necessity goods consumption” (Sun, 2006), the consumerist culture has infiltrated into the countryside, not to mention the city. In Xiao Wu’s village where his parents and siblings live, the consumerist mentality has become a dominant ideology. Its definition of a good life and a meaningful life has impressed many farmers, especially the younger generations like Xiao Wu’s siblings. Many of them submit to consumerism. Even though they earn much less than their city counterparts, yet when they smoke, they prefer Marlboro, which is ten times more expensive than their locally produced cigarettes. It is not that the quality of the imported cigarettes is much more superior to the local counterparts. The fact that they are imported from the U.S. signifies taste and “advanced culture,” which in turn translates into social status. In preparing for the second son’s wedding, Xiao Wu’s parents decide to measure up to the city level of consumption, as they presume that the prospective daughter-in-law from the city will bring considerable dowry as evidenced by the motorcycle the in-laws family purchased for the second son as a gift. Penniless themselves, yet they decide they do not want to be “looked down upon in this matter,” so they ask the eldest son and Xiao Wu to each chip in for five thousand yuan, which then equals to two years’ income of an average farmer. Affording the luxury of a city daughter-in-law enhances the fracture between the countryside and the city as the countryside buttresses the development of the city through its self-degradation and exploitation.

It remains difficult for people in the countryside to relinquish such a desire of conspicuous consumption and choose instead a lifestyle based on voluntary simplicity. Consumerism turns all-pervasive with the aid of culture industry. In recent decades most of China’s cultural products and television programs are oriented towards the interests of the well-off urban residents and concern very little about the marginalized groups such as farmers. The contrast between the colorful city life and their own listless existence creates profound psychological consequences, one of which is that they internalize and accept their own situation as “backwardness” that needs to be got rid of. While they embrace the consumerist culture to remove themselves from this constructed sense of “backwardness,” they have already fallen into the trap of modernization narrative. Xiao Wu’s pager stands as such an ironic symbol of this trap. It is Mei Mei who asks Xiao Wu to buy the pager, an expensive and fashionable commodity in mid-1990s serving a dual purpose: communication and conspicuous consumption.

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<sup>7</sup>The homogeneous, empty time turns out to be what Ban Wang (2005) describes, using a visual metaphor, as “a cyclical wheel of the perpetual return of the same” (p.244).



At first, Xiao Wu frequently takes a look at the pager to see if Mei Mei is calling him, but no communication is in view. Then the pager is showing around in Xiao Wu's family to enlist everybody's envy and becomes a talking point for Xiao Wu's father to ask for money from him. When it does finally ring, it is the time when Xiao Wu is captured by the police. The message on the pager is only a routine weather forecast that is devoid of any human affect.

### 3. Conclusion: The Negating Subject

While the regime of homogeneous empty time is creating its ideal subject and interpellating concrete individuals into submissive subjects through ideological state apparatuses, it also gives rise to the negating subject, because where there is this homogenizing pressure, there is the cry of pain. The placeless Xiao Wu feels his past experience, memory, and treasured beliefs are being wiped out or recognized as unreal by the present time. His frustration and pain in the fitting-in process speaks volumes about the ongoing homogenizing process. Before he becomes a subject, he is subjugated to this homogeneous empty time. In this process of subjugation, Xiao Wu is holding up to the remnant values of brotherhood, fidelity, and familial care. These values are foregrounded exactly because they are endangered.

In face of a crumbling value system and a massive homogenizing force, what Xiao Wu does, if I can call it the strategy he takes, can be linked to what Adorno called "negative dialectics." Adorno has noted the function of the dominant subject to subsume all objects under its control. The dominant subject embodies a discursive reality that tends to reduce other realities to a kind of voiceless non-reality. This mechanism of domination also works through the notion of identity, by identifying as real what conforms to the dominant subject, and as unreal or non-existent what does not. Adorno lays stress on the subversive potential of the non-identity that "defies subsumption under identity" (2000, p.61). This non-identity constantly transgresses the rules of the established dominating identity without establishing its own identity as the dominating one (Adorno, 2000). This negating subject that emerges out of non-identity thinking plays a similar role to the "vanishing mediator" (Balibar, 2003) or "the in-between of history" (Lu Xun, 1995), which is also a non-identity. It aims at subverting the dominant subject without establishing its own as the dominant.<sup>8</sup>

Involuntarily swept into the torrents of the homogeneous empty time, Xiao Wu turns into exactly such an incarnation of negative dialectics. Since Xiao Wu is a pickpocket, his identity cannot even be registered as a legitimate one in the human-centered value system. On the other hand, his non-identity paradoxically provides him with an even better vantage point from which to question the norms set forth by the progressive time as well as to defend his dignity in face of a massive force that attempts to invalidate it. Xiao Wu does possess a strong sense of self-worth and still roots himself in a humanistic value system that recognizes the value of fellowship. By foregrounding Xiao Wu and his struggle within a hostile environment, Jia Zhangke illustrates what Chinese people have lost: "In their youthful days, Xiao Wu and his buddies shared a kind of code of brotherhood and respected the sanctity of a promise. These are things we've lost" (Barden, 1999).

Xiao Wu treasures brotherhood and abides by the honor of a promise. He explains to his friend Gengsheng that he wants to give the wedding gift to Xiao Yong not because of the matter of money, but because of an "unusual relationship" between Xiao Yong and him. While Xiao Yong keeps interpreting Xiao Wu's gift as "money," thus turning the "unusual relationship" into a market relationship, Xiao Wu insists on calling his gift money "gift." Xiao Wu's insistence reveals his disdain of the gift's exchange value, the emphasis on which threatens to turn the gift into a mere commodity. For him, the exchange value and the use value of the gift are in sync and both of them point to his treasured brotherhood with its utopian space as *jianghu* (literally, rivers and lakes).<sup>9</sup> *Jianghu* remains a utopian space for Xiao Wu to struggle to fulfill his subjectivity. Suffice it to say here that the materialistic living space Xiao Wu trapped in stands as a sharp contrast to the "qing [affect]"-oriented and "yi [justice and loyalty]"-oriented *jianghu* space as depicted in John Woo's classic film *Diexue shuangxiong* [The Killer] (1990), a repeated reference in *Xiao Wu*.

<sup>8</sup> Naoki Sakai suggests that the modern subject should never seek to be a dominant subject. Sakai approvingly perceives in Lu Xun "a desperate effort to resist subjectivity, to resist subjection to subjectivity, and finally to resist subjection to the subject" (501). Sakai's statement is in line with Adorno's negative dialectics.

<sup>9</sup> By adhering to the code of brotherhood honor and disdaining the exchange value of the gift, Xiao Wu may participate in creating what Meng Yue calls "the history of the noncapital," which "refers to a history where capital and commodity work but do not dominate" (2006, p.218).

To find a friend in the real world like Xiao Zhuang or Li Ying in *The Killer* would only remain a dream. Nonetheless, Xiao Wu's clinging to human affect does not change. He is captured when his pager rings off, but he does not worry about his being captured. What he cares about is whether it is Mei Mei who is calling him.

Xiao Wu clings to affect between fellow beings, while the world valorizes monetary success. Xiao Wu does not accumulate wealth; at least the film does not draw attention to this aspect. His pains can never be alleviated because of his capability of becoming an Economic Man. He has the potential to become as monetarily successful as Xiao Yong; after all, he is a highly skilled artisan pickpocket and even has quite a few apprentices under his direct command. However, he chooses not to do so. Xiao Wu is seeking anything beyond the possessive logic, so what he reaps is further loneliness. The despair and loneliness of a "good person" [hao ren]<sup>10</sup> make the Successful Person [niu ren] such as Xiao Yong appear illegitimate.

The values Xiao Wu upholds, such as loyalty to a brotherhood code of honor and fidelity in partner relationships, would seem outmoded in a changed time. However, these values seem outmoded only because the progressive time makes it seem so, because it changes time into abstract lineal form, which prioritizes those values that fit well into its trajectory. With his negating of the practices espoused by the progressive time, Xiao Wu embodies what Chatterjee calls "the real time-space of modern life" which is "heterogeneous, unevenly dense." Exactly as Chatterjee argues, these heterogeneous times "are not mere survivals of a pre-modern past: they are new products of the encounter with modernity itself" (1999, p.131). Xiao Wu's negation of the progressive time stands not as a nostalgic longing, but as a conscious effort of envisioning a new future starting from the here and the now.

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<sup>10</sup> The term "good person" [haoren] evokes the intertextuality between *Xiao Wu* and Jia's 2006 film *Still Life* (Sanxia haoren, literally, "good people from the Three Gorges").

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