

Agnieszka Mikrut-Żaczekiewicz

The 'small people' in the time of the great change – Jia Zhangke's films.

Thesis written under the direction of prof. zw. dr hab. Alicja Helman

Cracow: Faculty of Management and Social Communication UJ

Key words: Jia Zhangke, contemporary Chinese cinema, Chinese art, Chinese society, socio-economic changes in postsocialist China

SUMMARY

The doctoral dissertation is an attempt to characterise the Jia Zhangke's movies with reference to the socio-economic and cultural changes in China at the end of 20th and the beginning of 21st century.

Jia Zhangke is one of the most prominent contemporary Chinese film-makers and a leading figure of so named *Sixth Generation* of film directors in the People's Republic of China. According to his words, Jia makes movies 'to describe Chinese reality without distortion'¹. Most of his movies focus on examining settings and lifestyles in the fast changing reality after so called Four Modernizations (goals to develop the sectors of agriculture, industry, national defence, science and technology, enacted by Deng Xiaoping in 1978) in PRC.

The time of change and the 'small people'

The economic changes started in 1978 when the reforms introduced market principles. That time China moved from state-run economy to free market capitalism. It began with decollectivisation of agriculture and then privatization and restructuring of enterprises. What's more, to attract foreign investments, six Special Economic Zones had been set up. Thanks to the implementation of Deng's goals, the economy of China has grown really fast, but at the same time,

¹ Samuel Douhaire, *Far from the Mandarins of Beijing*, [online] <http://www.liberation.com/page.php?Article=29354>, [access 22.02.2014]

significant and rapid economic changes have many social consequences. Some of them are: increasing inequality within the country, emergence of the lower class and migration from countryside to city in search of employment. Due to industry modernization and the land reforms, the social welfare system disappeared and the approach to 'iron rice bowl' (system of guaranteed lifetime employment) had changed. Workers lost their previous job security and subsidised housing. Members of lower class, called in dissertation the *small people* despite of rapid economic growth aren't beneficiary of the country's prosperity.

In the eight chapters of dissertation author considers eleven Jia Zhangke's films (documentary and fiction) with references to changes discussed above. Director shows *small people* trapped in a postsocialist reality. The key subject of a discourse in his films is the picture of Chinese society in the time of change. Jia is preoccupied with lack of people's mutual interactions, social network and changing role of family caused by internal migration and westernisation of culture. He explores how an employment instability and lower social status affects not only living conditions and financial prospects, but also relationships between people and pursuit of wealth. In his films, the director presents effects of globalization on Chinese culture and society. Jia shows how easily the *small people* adopt western culture (many aspects of Western culture are idealized as symbols of status and beauty) and explores their unfulfilled desire to see the outside world. He also presents frustration of young people caused by dissonance between their desire to become a part of the global culture and poverty in postsocialist China. In the last films discussed in dissertation, Jia Zhangke concentrates on memory, especially collective memory and its relation to history and identity. Using individual memories he wants to evoke unofficial history in order to help *small people* establish their identity and to find their place in a rapidly modernizing society.

The dissertation shows how Jia Zhangke's films discuss the most important political and social issues in China.