

Philippa Lovatt, 'Sound, Music and Memory in Jia Zhangke's Hometown Trilogy' in Liz Greene and Danijela Kulezic-Wilson (eds.) *Palgrave Handbook of Sound Design and Music in Screen Media: Integrated Soundtracks* (Palgrave, 2016), pp. 229-244.

Music cannot exist in isolation from a broader geography of sound and the very idea of music as a separate category of sonic experience depends on this cultural politics. The struggle between authorised and unauthorised sound constantly raises these issues as spatial questions. Such issues include the subversive role of sound to create alternative and semiautonomous spaces, as well as the socio-political mechanisms for enforcing silence. (George Reville, 2000, p. 602)

A shrill, sustained note pierces the darkness of the black screen of the opening credits of Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (*Zhantai*, 2000). A moment later, the melodious sounds of traditional Chinese instruments can be heard as the musicians in the performance troupe about to play begin to tune up: first, the lute-like strings of the sanxian, joined then by the fiddle sound of the erhu and then a bamboo flute—the lilting, bird-like dizi. These sounds interweave with the ambient expectant hum of the auditorium and the voices of a group of peasants talking and laughing nearby, waiting to take their seats. As the musicians warm up their instruments, playing different variations of arpeggios and glissandi, the formal properties of the exercises, which are by their nature repetitive, convey stilted movement. The ascending notes seem to embody a sense of forward projection that is drawn back as the notes descend, encapsulating sonically a feeling of temporal suspension. These first three minutes of screen time capture the mood of expectation that pervades the entire film, and Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy', through sound.

The 'Hometown Trilogy': *Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (2000) and *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren xiaoyao*, 2002) is set in the Shanxi Province of rural northern China where Jia was born and grew up in the 1970s and 1980s. The three films chart that period from the end of the Cultural Revolution to the early days of the reform era, focusing as Michael Berry notes, on 'the plight of marginalised individuals—singers, dancers, pickpockets, prostitutes and drifters—as they struggle to navigate through the radically transforming terrain of contemporary China' (2009, p. 20). Although fictional, as Jin Liu has observed, the films offer a "supplementary history", a documentary-based representation of a contemporary Chinese underclass' (2006, p. 164).

Ching Kwan Lee and Guobin Yang have argued that since the reform era, popular memories have gained particular currency and momentum in the People's Republic of China (PRC) as people have tried to find 'moral and cognitive frameworks to understand, assess, and sometimes resist [the] momentous changes in their lives' (2007, p. 1). In this context, they assert, through 'television series, documentaries, novels, songs, theatre, music, and memorabilia in street markets, the purveyors of public and commercial nostalgia for China's revolutionary past have produced a "memory industry"' (2007, p. 1). The films of the Fifth Generation produced a very particular 'version' of the past through their use of epic narratives, often demonstrating a similarly nostalgic attitude towards the Cultural Revolution. By contrast, leading Sixth Generation director, Jia Zhangke, is concerned with making films that reflect the 'ordinariness' and heterogeneity of 'unofficial' memories (*minjian de jiyi*) (Jia Zhangke, 1999).

In an interview in 2007, Jia discusses the significance of music and sound for his films and for the memories he has of that time growing up. As he explains:

One overwhelming memory I have of Fenyang ... is the vast numbers of loud-speakers that filled the air with a rich soundscape of political propaganda and music. Most factories had a tannoy system that would broadcast revolutionary songs or announce which new official had come to work there, or which party member had recently been pardoned or sanctioned. In the mornings, the workers who slept in dormitories at the back of the factory would file out to its bugle call. Such sounds transport me instantly back to that era, and my childhood reality is reflected in the multiple layers of sound that I use in my own films. (Jia Zhangke, 2007)

Jin Liu argues that in Jia's films the acoustic realm helps to establish both the period and the region in which they are set: popular music is like 'cheap wallpaper' of the time, he argues, while the sounds of local Jin opera (*Jin ju*) denote the specific geographical location (2006, p. 175). As I have discussed elsewhere, it is through this layering of acoustic space that the films communicate the ways in which social and personal memories are connected; their rich sonic texture expresses the dialectic between the public and the private, by establishing both the atmosphere of an era within the diegetic space of the film through music, radio or television broadcasts, for example, and by setting the (sometimes conflicting) emotional tone for each scene (Philippa Lovatt, 2012, p. 420). In the 'Hometown Trilogy' the complex diegetic soundscapes, which are often recorded using the documentary method of 'direct sound', are represented as 'occupied' spaces: acoustic realms that are densely layered with the competing discourses of reform era China. This chapter explores how this experience of lived space during the period of China's rapid transformation in the years following the end of the Cultural Revolution is articulated through sound and music.

## REVOLUTIONARY SOUNDS

*Platform*, the second film in the trilogy (although the earliest in terms of its period setting), follows the lives of the members of the Fenyang Cultural Group: a state-run Maoist propaganda troupe that perform plays and music around remote areas of Northern China. The film chronicles their journey from the early days of the reform era in 1979 to the end of the 1980s, when the group have been transformed through privatization into the All Star Rock n' Breakdance Electronic Band. Documenting this period of rapid societal change (chronologically, the period leading up to the first film of the trilogy, *Xiao Wu*), the film expresses the relationship between memory and history through the transforming soundscape of the era: from revolutionary songs of the early post-Mao period, to illegal Taiwanese gangtai, to the sounds of Bollywood emanating from the local cinema, to the nihilistic electronic rock music of the reform era, and finally to the 'easy listening' sounds of 'Travelling in Suzhou' (*Gusu xing*) that sonically encode the domesticity of the film's closing scene.

The sense of expectation established on the soundtrack in the first few moments of *Platform* is violently ruptured as the house bell rings out over the acoustic space of the auditorium, calling to attention the start of the performance. One of the members of the performance troupe, Yin Ruijuan (Zhao Tao), walks onto the stage (dressed in a traditional Maoist jacket and cap) and introduces the play: 'Train to Shaoshan' (*Huochē xiāngzhe Shaoshan pào*). The audience applauds enthusiastically in recognition of Shaoshan's significance as the hometown of Mao Zedong. Ruijuan continues: 'A southbound train races across the sunny land; it is heading for Shaoshan, Chairman Mao's hometown. Look, here they come!' According to Elizabeth J. Perry, during the revolutionary period theatre played a crucial role in 'eliciting an emotional reaction that was used intentionally to solidify popular

commitment' (2002, p. 112). While discussions of the Cultural Revolution have tended to focus on the role of ideology, organization and social structure, the mass mobilization of emotions through staged theatrical performances, as well as performative 'struggle sessions', was critical to the campaign's initial success, and to its sustained level of support. Perry writes that 'such techniques drew creatively upon dominant themes in Chinese political discourse that emphasize group—more than individual—bases of morality' and that building 'a sense of collective solidarity ... was a fundamental element of revolutionary mobilization' (2002, p. 112).

Significantly then, in this scene in *Platform*, the point of audition during the mise-en-abyme is from within the space of the diegetic audience itself, as the camera films the performance in extreme long shot from the back of the auditorium. The slight reverberation of the speaker's amplified voice resonates around the space and seems to merge with the subdued ambient sounds coming from the stalls: the coughs, chatter and laughter of the audience. This effect is further underscored as the mellifluous rhythm of Ruijuan's words and warm tonal quality of her voice seem to be *absorbed* into the ambience of the general room tone. This aural confluence creates an impression of wholeness—an emotional quality that captures the ideal essence of collectivism. Along with the mobilizing lyrics of the song, which project a sense of dynamism through the evocation of travel, this scene demonstrates the extent to which Maoism continued to be a cultural force, particularly in rural areas, even after the death of Mao Zedong, while highlighting the importance of the role played by emotion in mobilizing the masses during the revolutionary period.

As the play begins, the troupe's autist plays a soaring, joyful melody while a group of actors (bent down over wooden chairs pretending to be the wheels of the train) enter from stage right singing in harmony with the flute: *Wheels flying, whistles blowing, train heading for Shaoshan, over mountains across rivers toward the radiant sun*. A ripple of laughter flows across the audience in response to this comical sight. Then one of the characters on stage asks how much longer the journey will take, as he says that one of the older passengers is finding it too slow. Somewhat affronted by this, the old man in question steps up and says in response, 'Young folk, don't you know?' before bursting into song: '*Learn from Dazhai Commune, where poor farmers raised the red ag. They united in action—fearless and practical they acted as one*'. The last line of the song is emphasized as the group repeats it, raising their arms in unison. The dynamism evoked by the lyrics and performance style is also made concrete through the motif of the train which, first introduced here, becomes a pivotal, structuring motif in the film. The verbal exchange described above betrays an anxiety over the tantalizingly slow pace of change as experienced by young people in peripheral communities during this period. However, the theme of train travel also resonates more broadly within the film as a powerful indicator of the changing perceptions of space and time during this decade of rapid industrialization, as well as the changing horizons of personal expectation that followed.

According to Arnold Trachtenberg, during the process of industrialization in the West the railway introduced 'a new system of behaviour: not only of travel and communication but of thought, of feeling, of expectation ... the Utopian promise implicit in the establishment of speed as a new principle of public life' (Trachtenberg cited in Schivelbusch, 1986, p. xiii). While in China at the end of the 1970s, this utopian promise was almost tangible in the country's economic centres, in places like Fenyang, being as it was on the cusp of such great change (but always just out of reach), it manifested itself in a feeling of suspension. This is articulated in the scene that takes place shortly after the performance where the troupe's

leader, Lao Xu (Liu Juan), berates Cui Mingliang (the film's central character played by Wang Hongwei) for keeping them waiting, saying that he lacks 'discipline' and does not understand the principles of collectivism. Interestingly, he focuses his annoyance on Mingliang's impression of the train during the performance:

*Mingliang*: Give me a break I'm not that late. I didn't spoil the show.

*Lao Xu*: Didn't you? What the hell were those train sounds?

*Mingliang*: I don't know how a train sounds!

*Lao Xu*: Never taken a train? Even if you've never tasted pork you must have seen a pig!

[Everyone laughs].

*Mingliang*: I've only heard one!

As their hometown Fenyang is not on a railway line, it is likely that none of these characters would have ever heard a train and so their only reference points against which to measure their performance are fictional. Driving into the darkness, the group playfully mimic the toot of a train's whistle, producing an antiphonal response to the sustained note heard at the very beginning of the film. We then hear the group vocalize the chugging noises of the train's engine and the steady rhythm of the wheels on the tracks, which bring us close to the film's prologue.

The title of the film refers to the platform of a train station (an image that connotes both movement and stillness), but also comes from a pop song of the late 1980s by Liu Hong. This song appears later in the film in a scene in which the performance troupe's truck gets stuck in wet sands in a remote area of northern China while they are on tour. Realizing that they may be there for some time, Mingliang puts a tape of the song on the truck's cassette player. As the other members of the troupe gather round to listen, the absence of dialogue focuses our attention on the song's lyrics, which seem to speak of the characters' own subjective experience of suspended time. In the song, a character waits for a train that seems like it will never arrive: '*The long and empty platform/Lonely, we can only wait/All my love is out-bound/Nothing on the in-bound train*'. As well as signaling a particular time period, the wistful lyrics and melancholy music (a guitar-based soft rock sound) convey the frustration of unfulfilled expectation that characterized the experience of modernity in those communities peripheral to the dynamic centres of change in this period in China's recent past, as information about the radical social and economic developments being experienced in China's coastal cities (such as Shanghai, Guangzhou and Wenzhou) gradually filtered through.

One of the group catches the sound of a distant freight train making its way closer towards them. Whooping and screaming, they run to get close to it before it passes by. On the soundtrack, the volume of the diegetic pop song is heightened as it continues over the noise of the train blowing its whistle and rumbling loudly over the tracks before coming into view. This aural juxtaposition emphasizes both the symbolic weight of the motif in the film and in the characters' lives at this pivotal moment. As Jason McGrath observes, as well as being 'a literal industrial emblem of modernisation' the train is also an 'abstract symbol of modernity actually experienced largely as an absence and a longing' (2007, p. 98). The characters'

longing is tangible as we see them filmed in extreme long shot climb the hillside and run up onto the railway bridge, calling out the train sounds they had performed earlier in the opening scene as the train itself speeds out of view.

During the course of the film, the wonder demonstrated in the scene on the bridge turns into one of silent resignation as the 'utopian' promise of the earlier moment never materializes. While in the scene described above, the train's whistle symbolizes new (albeit unattainable) opportunities for travel and experience, by the film's final scene it has become an emblem of thwarted ambition. Framed within a small interior domestic space, Mingliang dozes on the sofa while Ruijuan, now his wife, entertains their young child as a kettle boils on the hob. The soporific atmosphere created by Mingliang's faint snore and the traditional sounds of 'Travelling in Suzhou' (*Gusu xing*) playing in the background is shattered by the kettle's whistle blasting into the acoustic space. This sound, a homophone of the piercing note that began the film, now brings it to a close. The symbolic use of antiphony here suggests that in the space of the ten years, despite the official rhetoric of progress and transformation, for them, nothing has really changed (see Ying Bao, 2013, p. 214).

The rhetoric of synchronicity encapsulated in the train motif in *Platform* forms a dialectic in the film with the discourse of productivity and industry associated with revolutionary mobilization. Both discursive frameworks privilege the regulation and productive use of time and the notion of a forward trajectory (literally and ideologically). As the improvised sound of the train (by the performance troupe) cuts abruptly to the fast, regimented rhythm of a sewing machine, we see a woman dressed in Maoist clothing, bent over the machine steadily operating its foot pedal, moving her body slightly in synchrony with its beat as she listens to revolutionary music on the radio: the 1948 propaganda song 'We Workers Have Power' (*Za men gong ren you li liang*). The music has a similarly upbeat rhythm and a 'rallying' energy (resulting from the different voices singing together in harmony) that interweaves with the rhythm of the machine, thereby also forming a connection with the movement of the woman's body.

George Revill contends that the 'physical properties of sound, pitch, rhythm, timbre seem to act on and through the body in ways which require neither explanation nor reflection' (2000, p. 602). For him this means that music has a particular ability to 'play on the emotions' in order to 'arouse and subdue, animate and pacify'—an ability exploited by nationalist music, he suggests, as it 'draws cultural authority from the apparently shared intersubjective qualities of sound' (p. 602). Nationalist music, he argues, draws together social and political messages and incorporates them into 'an aesthetic of bodily involvement' encouraging participation through 'its rhythmic and melodic qualities' (p. 602). The mention made here of bodily movement has a particular significance in relation to this scene in *Platform* while also resonating with Perry's discussion of the role of 'emotion work' in 'mobilizing the masses'. Both of these arguments are at work in this scene in *Platform* as the 'intersubjective qualities' of 'We Workers Have Power' (its timbre and harmony) demonstrate this ability of music to 'harness' the emotions and produce 'participatory' subjects. Moreover, the synergic relationship between the mobilizing force of this music and the repetitive rhythm of machine noise in this scene suggests that the body's rhythms can similarly be 'harnessed' by those of industry, thereby creating a regulated 'productive body' for the 'participatory subject' characteristic of the socialist era. Yet, it soon becomes clear that times are changing in Fenyang, as Mingliang, who is the woman's son, pesters her to finish the bell-bottom trousers that she has been sewing for him. When Mingliang jokes that he is an 'art worker' who uses his brain, she answers incredulously: 'Really? Here you follow orders'. Later when the father

criticizes his ‘bourgeois’ trousers and accuses Mingliang of sounding like a ‘capitalist roader’, their dialogue highlights the tensions between the competing ideologies of communism and individualism that began to circulate in the early days of the reform era: a pivotal socio-cultural shift that Jia’s film here articulates through the layering of sound.

#### ‘A NEW MODE OF LISTENING’

Describing the soundscape of the PRC between 1949 and 1979, Nimrod Baranovitch argues that the state’s monolithic structure, which ‘imposed unity in almost every domain’, resulted in there being only one audible voice within the public sphere, that of the Communist Party (2003, p. 1). Reaching a crescendo in the decade of the Cultural Revolution, the party’s message, he writes, ‘was disseminated, through every possible medium— film, radio, recordings, television, live performances, and public address systems—and [was] heard and seen “everywhere” and “at all times”’ (p. 1). During the reform era, however, the soundscape of the PRC also began to change. As he explains:

One of the immediate consequences of the ... ‘open door policy’ was the flooding into the country of foreign cultural products, among which was popular music. As foreigners could move into and out of China more freely, cassettes and records of contemporary pop started to be smuggled in and soon swept the entire mainland. (p. 1)

The introduction of new (comparatively) inexpensive tape recorders and cassettes, particularly ‘gangtai’ music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, Baranovitch argues, had a ‘decentralizing and democratizing effect’ as for the first time since the establishment of the People’s Republic, people could choose what they wanted to listen to (pp. 12–13). As more people started to own tape recorders, he explains, a ‘new mode of listening’ began to be experienced as the reception of music no longer needed to be restricted to public spaces where the sounds heard were dependent on the choices made by the state, but now ‘individuals could create [their own] intimate sonic space’ (p. 13).

In an interview with Michael Berry, Jia describes the impact that popular music had on his generation as he recalls the first time he heard illegal gangtai music from Taiwan by the pop phenomenon Teresa Teng:

At the time, I was quite young and couldn’t really say what it was about her voice, but it was so moving ... Later when I went to college and reflected back on this time, I realised that her music represented a massive change in our cultural landscape. When I was a child we used to ... sing ‘We Are to Carry on Communism’ (*Women shi gongchanzhuyi de jiebanren*) or in the eighties ... ‘We are the New Generation of the Eighties’ (*Women shi bashi niandai de xin yidai*), both of which highlighted the ‘we’—the collective. But Teresa Teng’s songs were always about ‘me’—the individual. Songs like ‘I Love You’ (*Wo ai ni*) and ‘The Moon Represents My Heart’ (*Yueliang daibiao wo de xin*) were something completely new. So people of my generation were suddenly infected with this very personal individual world. Before that, everything was collective: we lived in a collective dormitory, our parents worked as part of a collective, and our schools were structured in the same manner. In our educational system the individual belonged to the nation and was part of the collective. But in the eighties everything changed, and it all started with popular music. (Jia Zhangke in Michael Berry, 2005, pp. 189–90)

Geremie R. Barmé writes that: ‘The threat of popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan had been recognised for nearly a decade, and in the early 1980s, Teresa Teng (Deng Lijun) cassettes were confiscated and burned in an attempt to deter people from nonmainland music’ (1999, p. 117). Just as rail travel evokes the changing conceptualizations of time and space in Jia’s films, the presence of diegetic pop music therefore also signifies fundamental shifts that occurred at this time in the perception of space-time and the limits of experience, particularly across the three films of the Hometown Trilogy which recurrently turn to pop music to convey the changing mood of the era.

Later in *Platform*, when Mingliang’s friend Jun (Liang Jingdong) returns from a visit to Guangzhou (an economic centre in the south) he brings with him the ‘new sounds’ of the city: pop music from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Carrying a ghetto blaster, he walks along the path towards the troupe’s rehearsal space: the centre of the sound *moving with him* as opposed to *surrounding him*. The music he is listening to is ‘Genghis Khan’ (*Cheng ji si han*)—a poppy rock ‘n’ roll number by Zhang Di with twangy guitars and a stomping bass line (the lyrics tell us Zhang Di is ‘*always asked if Taiwan girls are better than Singapore girls*’). Highlighting a connection made between sound and travel in an earlier scene in Jun’s bedroom, Mingliang walks towards him pointing a gun and joking: ‘Stop! Foreign Devil!’ When the rest of the troupe rushes out to see him, they are all excited to hear about life in the south and listen to the new sounds he has brought back with him. A cut to an interior ‘disco’ scene shows the group dancing energetically and expressively, foregrounding a sense of autonomy that vividly contrasts with the regimented ‘machine-like’ movement of Mingliang’s mother at the sewing machine earlier. This diegetic sound then bleeds into the next scene, which takes place the following day as Zhang Di is still being played on Jun’s ghetto blaster as he and his friends do their chores; importantly, bringing the sound with them, they are able to create their own autonomous acoustic world. This ‘new world’ also reaches out into the wider world with the promise of travel and adventure, as indicated on the diegetic soundtrack by the overlaying of this song with a ‘Teach-Yourself- English’ tape playing loudly in the aural mix, seeming to bring this ‘other world’ closer to home.

From 1978 onwards, with the impact of Deng Xiaoping’s economic reforms, China experienced ‘a radical break’ with its revolutionary past, which led to a questioning of the framework of experiences, values and ideologies associated with that past (Dirlik and Zhang, 2000, p. 8). This sense of flux is expressed at several points in Jia’s earlier film, *Xiao Wu*, through its use of sound and music. The film begins with an audio recording of a kind of comic skit (*xiangsheng*) set against the black screen of the opening credits (Berry, 2008, p. 250). A clipped, fast-paced, staccato exchange between a man and a woman speaking in northern Chinese dialect is intercut with the disembodied sound of an audience’s laughter and applause which ripples warmly across the non-diegetic soundtrack. This then merges with the diegetic sound of the distant rumble of a truck coming closer as it makes its way along the dusty country road towards a family who are waiting by the roadside. In the distant background behind them, stark, branchless trees visually echo the tall industrial chimneys also in the frame, of a factory formerly run by the people’s commune, a grim image, argues Xiaoping Lin, that recalls Mao’s disastrous Great Leap Forward launched three decades previously (Xiaoping Lin, 2005, p. 191). *Xiangsheng* became very popular during the reform era in response to the rapid changes being experienced. While many Chinese lost patience with the slow-paced didacticism of traditional Maoist drama, the quick-paced, lively entertainment offered by these sketches reflected more closely their own lives and concerns, deploying parody or satire to critique state corruption as well as contemporary social phenomena (Mackerras, 1981, p. 103). In this opening scene, the quick-fire pace of the

satirical soundtrack conflicts with the slow (even static) pace of life shown on screen where we see characters standing, watching, waiting while ‘China’s post-socialist project ... passes them by’ (Berry, 2008, p. 251).

Like *Platform*, *Xiao Wu* documents a period of turbulent transition in China’s recent history. Set towards the end of the 1990s, the film focuses on Xiao Wu (Wang Hongwei), a pickpocket from Fenyang, who has lost touch with his former best friend Xiaoyong (Hao Hongjian) now a successful business man, a ‘model entrepreneur’ (and local gangster), who no longer wants to know him, and his values seem to have no place in the fast changing world of the ‘new China’. In *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, Pam Cook defines nostalgia as ‘a state of longing for something that is known to be irretrievable, but is sought anyway’ (2005, p. 2). As Cook suggests, there is something intrinsically melancholic about nostalgia and this is a mood that pervades *Xiao Wu* enhanced by the use of diegetic pop music in the film. In particular, Xiao Wu’s ideological dislocation is evoked at several points in the film by diegetic music that becomes slowed or distorted. The first instance of this occurs outside Xiaoyong’s home when we hear the pop song ‘Farewell My Concubine’ (*Bawang bieji*) by Tu Honggang, which at first seems to be non-diegetic. The soft-rock ballad has a soaring melody, and questioning existential lyrics ‘Who is the hero now?’ that perform an important narrative role in that they convey Xiao Wu’s emotional state, and more specifically, his profound sense of loss and alienation as he tries to function in a world he no longer recognizes (Jin Liu, 2013, p. 195). The scene, which takes place just before Xiaoyong’s wedding, begins with the piercing sound of his mobile phone ringtone as a mutual friend calls to try and persuade him to reconsider inviting Xiao Wu. Unsettled by this reminder of his old life, Xiaoyong paces backwards and forwards in front of a wall outside his house that has been scored with height lines and inscribed with the date ‘1982’. As he hangs up, he reaches up to touch the lines on the wall. We later see Xiao Wu mirror this gesture as he drunkenly walks past while we hear ‘Farewell My Concubine’ again on the soundtrack (see Lovatt, 2015, p. 192). The mood created by the stretched out, distorted sound of the music (suggestive of a kind of sonic resistance to the passage of time) heightens our sense of Xiao Wu’s ‘obsessive desire to recapture the past’, which we know is doomed to fail (Cook, 2005, p. 8).

As the film cuts to a shot of Xiao Wu standing in a busy street opposite a stall selling ghetto blasters (bearers of the reform era’s burgeoning potential for a more heterogeneous soundscape), the music’s source is located and the song ends abruptly when the stop button is pressed on one of the machines. After pick-pocketing one of the stall’s customers, Xiao Wu walks home whistling the song to himself and on the way passes a group of children who are singing a skipping rhyme. This layering of sounds, against the memory of the song’s questioning lyrics, suggests that like the demolition of Fenyang’s old town centre where nothing is built in its place, Xiao Wu’s inability to position himself within the discourse of the new China makes him a spectral presence—a residual figure from the past who continues to ‘haunt’ the present. The song is heard again at the very end of the film after he is caught red-handed and arrested.

Another song that communicates the characters’ emotional state is ‘Heart Rain’ (*Xin yu*), which is heard several times in the film. The song’s mournful lyrics (about a lover who will ‘become someone else’s bride tomorrow’) foreshadow the failure of Xiao Wu’s relationship with Meimei (the karaoke singer and prostitute with whom he falls in love, played by Zuo Baitao) who eventually leaves town with some wealthy businessmen. The melancholic tone however also relates to the breakdown of the bond between Xiao Wu and his former friend;

tellingly, it is first heard as a background to some celebratory messages to Xiaoyong on his wedding being broadcast on local state television, and then later when a young couple sing it in front of a funeral parlour to a small gathered crowd.

In *The Space of a Song*, Richard Dyer argues that: ‘Song ... is at the intersection between individual feeling and the socially and historically specific shared forms available to express that feeling, forms that shape and limit and make indirect what can be expressed and even with any degree of consciousness felt’ (2011, p. 2). In this way, songs can not only communicate feeling but can also provide a way of giving form (or ‘voice’) to emotions that could not otherwise be expressed. For example, when Xiao Wu goes to visit Meimei at home when she is ill, she tells him how she loves to sing, and had dreams of becoming a star, but knows that she won’t succeed. He asks her to sing for him and she sings a Faye Wang song, ‘The Sky’ (*Tian kong*), making him promise not to laugh: ‘*Why is my sky always weeping, why does my sky always look so sad?*’. For Meimei, singing her idol’s song has an aspirational quality that elevates her above the drab reality of her everyday life. The act of singing itself opens up an imaginative, even utopian, space in which she can envisage a very different reality (a desire made evident at another point in the film when she telephones her mother and pretends that she is studying to be an actress in Beijing). Describing the scene, Jason McGrath writes: ‘As the ambient exterior noises of traffic fill the silences in their conversation, Xiao Wu and Meimei struggle to penetrate each other’s loneliness. When Xiao Wu asks Meimei to sing for him, her choice of song ... vocalizes the feelings of solitude and desire they cannot otherwise express’ (2007, pp. 92–3). It is worth noting that Xiao Wu only finds the courage to sing the song later when he’s alone and naked at a public bathhouse. But, while still in her room, when she asks him to sing, he refuses, and instead asks her to close her eyes before playing her the weary electronic version of ‘Fur Elise’ on his cigarette lighter, which similarly acts as a surrogate for his voice in moments of deeply felt emotion. First heard as he waits to give Xiaoyong a wedding gift (that is rejected), it plays again while Xiao Wu drunkenly watches Xiaoyong being interviewed on television. The scene ends with the lighter running out of battery and the tune whirring down to a halt while the image fades to black. Like the worn cassette tape playing ‘Farewell my Concubine’, ‘Fur Elise’ becomes therefore another aural evocation of the death of the friendship and the socialist values that it represented (to Xiao Wu at least).

## ACOUSTIC SPACE AND POWER

Deploying the documentary method of recording ‘direct sound’, *Xiao Wu*’s sound designer Zhang Yang produces a disorientating acoustic space that emphasizes texture over clarity. Elena Pollacchi has argued that the use of on-location sound recording in 1990s Chinese cinema is also indicative of a wider historical and industrial shift in the use of sound more generally in Chinese film. She describes how the old system of state studio production (1950s onwards) deliberately expelled natural sound ‘in order to emphasise, through dialogue and music, the ideological message’ whereas since the mid-1990s the increasing use of natural sound (as opposed to dubbing) points to changing production structures which have recently started to allow on-location filming (2008, p. 193). Adopting the *xianxhang* (shooting live) aesthetic first used by the New Documentary Film Movement, these films place far greater importance on the pro-filmic and the contingent. This filming practice and its aesthetic have significant political implications in relation to the representation of the power dynamics of lived space in China’s recent past.

Jacques Attali argues that ‘the monopolization of the broadcast of messages, the control of noise, and the industrialization of the silence of others assure the durability of power’ (1985, p. 6). Control over acoustic space is illustrated at several points in *Xiao Wu*, firstly when Xiao Wu arrives in Fenyang near the beginning of the film. In this scene, the first sounds we hear are of an authoritative male voice interrupting the sound of a pop song being broadcast over public loudspeakers in the street. While Xiao Wu stands with a crowd of people reading from a notice board about the ‘crackdown’ on criminal behaviour in the town, an acousmatic voice begins: ‘This announcement is presented by Public Security and the Justice Department concerning the self-denunciation of criminals’. As the voice reverberates around this space, other street sounds such as the rumble of car and motorbike engines combine with it to produce a cacophonous acoustic environment that sets the tone for the entire film.

The ability of sound to make material the abstract notion of power, and to both map out and ‘occupy’ territory, asserting control over its ‘subjects’, is demonstrated in the latter part of this scene when Xiao Wu hitches a lift on the back of a friend’s bicycle. As the camera films them in a tracking shot as they cycle along, they are shown to be physically moving further away from the source of the voice (projected from the overhead speaker), and yet, the sound of the broadcast does not quieten as we would expect, but remains at a constant volume. This effect suggests that the town’s inhabitants cannot escape the auditory regime of the Party and alludes to the omnipresence of its voice, which although produced from a centre of power that is *elsewhere* is at the same time perceived by the subject *everywhere*. Although we do see the speaker from which the voice is being projected, the effect is similar to Michel Chion’s description of the acousmatic voice in cinema. Occupying an ambiguous place, ‘being in the screen and not ... the acousmètre brings disequilibrium and tension’ (1999, pp. 23–4).

The pervasive atmosphere of control in *Xiao Wu* continues into the third film in the trilogy, *Unknown Pleasures* (*Ren Xiao Yao* ironically translates as ‘Free of All Constraints’—a poem by Taoist philosopher Zhuangzi that was also a pop hit by Taiwanese singer Richie Jen in 2001, the year in which it is set). The film takes place around the post-industrial mining town of Datong in northern Shanxi in the northeast of China. Xiaoping Lin notes that at this time, while China’s economic boom had brought prosperity to some, ‘it polarize[d] a society shaped for decades by Mao’s egalitarian socialism’. While foreign trade, the domestic market and living standards, he explains, had been ‘boosted’ by China ‘embrac[ing] capitalist globalization ... China’s efforts to build a free market economy forced countless state-owned enterprises into bankruptcy, resulting in mass unemployment and grave social problems unprecedented in the nation’s socialist history’ (2010, p. 1). Datong’s lack of infrastructure reflects this particular historical moment: it is a living graveyard of decaying buildings, semi-completed construction work and unfinished roads-to-nowhere. On the edge of town, tomblike industrial chimneys litter the barren post-socialist landscape, while electricity pylons stand nearby like scarecrows. This location is experienced by the two central protagonists, teenagers Bin Bin (Zhao Weiwei) and Xiao Ji (Wu Qiong), as a space of dislocation and inertia. As Michael Berry notes: ‘the physical landscape of destruction ... works as a powerful metaphor for the emotional, cultural and moral desolation of the characters as they blindly drift through towards an unknown destination’ (2009, p. 94). Lacking the enthusiasm and hopefulness of the young people in *Platform*, in *Unknown Pleasures* the characters seem lost and aimless. Born in the 1980s during the Open Door era (and a result of the state’s single child policy) they are the first generation to have no direct memory of Maoism, and look instead to global pop culture as a way out: the gangsters in

Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994) and Hong Kong action movies, for example, provide key role models for the two boys.

In contrast to *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*, figures of authority have only a peripheral presence in *Unknown Pleasures*, appearing just once near the beginning when petty crook Xiao Wu (also played by Wang Hongwei who appeared in the earlier film) is arrested by plain-clothes police, and again later at the very end of the film when one of the central characters, Bin Bin is arrested. And yet, the acoustic space of Datong appears similarly 'occupied' but here less by the official sounds of authoritarianism than by the Siren-like calls of consumerism, reflecting the changing mood of the time. Maurice Meisner has described how, in response to the ideological and political void that followed the collapse of the Cultural Revolution, Deng Xiaoping's government 'offered no great social and political ideals but rather promises of a better material life, encouraging the purchase of the new consumer goods rapidly appearing on department store shelves and on billboards that formerly displayed revolutionary slogans' (1986, p. 457). This ideological shift is treated ironically in the film as at the time of Xiao Wu's arrest, a promotion for the Datong Lottery is broadcast over a nearby loudspeaker outside the bus terminal building, while the protagonists are shown in long shot standing idly in front of the building's entrance. Firstly, a male voice announces: 'Try the lottery and make your leisure time pay'. With obvious irony, just at the moment when two policemen run up to Xiao Wu to handcuff him, a woman's voice joins in and in a spoken harmony they proclaim: 'The Shanxi Charity Lottery wishes you the best of luck!'.

The film focuses on the experiences of Bin Bin and Xiao Ji, two unemployed teenagers who live with their parents. While Bin Bin has a girlfriend (at least at the start of the film), Xiao Ji ill-fatedly falls in love with Qiao Qiao (Zhao Tao), a singer and prostitute who works for her boyfriend and pimp promoting Mongolian King liquor. The town is not completely without hope—at one point we see a group of textile workers celebrating the news of Beijing's successful 2008 Olympic bid—but overall, the atmosphere is bleak. As with the earlier films in the trilogy, in *Unknown Pleasures* pop songs perform an important role in expressing the emotional state of the characters. Richie Jen's *Ren Xiao Yao* is heard at several key points in the film, but each time conveys a slightly different mood. It is first heard booming out from the speakers next to the stage where the Mongolian King Liquor Troupe are performing, and again later when Bin Bin and his girlfriend Yuanyuan (Zhou Qingfeng) meet at a karaoke hotel, where they hold hands and softly sing along to the lyrics: '*Whatever sorrows come ... I follow the wind, I roam happy and free*'. Yet, the sorrows come more quickly than expected for Bin Bin: while Yuanyuan gains a place at the University of Beijing to study international trade, Bin Bin himself misses a chance to also make a new life in the city as a 'Beijing soldier' when a blood test indicates that he has hepatitis. After a failed (and pitifully executed) bank heist towards the end of the film, Bin Bin is caught and arrested while his best friend Xiao Ji makes an escape on his motorbike and heads for the new Datong-Beijing expressway, only to break down on the outskirts of town.

At the police station, Bin Bin reveals his naïvety about the legal system and is shocked to learn that the punishment for bank robbery is execution. Irritated by Bin Bin's insolence when he disputes the likelihood of this sentence (because it was 'only *attempted* robbery'), the police sergeant attempts to reassert his authority by ordering Bin Bin to sing: 'Stand up and sing a song', he commands him. After a short silence, he orders him again. Drawing a blank, Bin Bin asks, 'Sing what?' to which the sergeant answers simply, 'Something you know well'. With painful awkwardness he delivers a fragile, a cappella version of 'Ren xiao yao'. Rather than implying some kind of 'inner' freedom, the absurdity of hearing the song's

lyrics within this hostile environment only serves to heighten our awareness of his vulnerability within the system. Martin Cloonan and Bruce Johnson have argued that the tendency of early popular music studies to ‘celebrate the power of music to empower the construction of individual and social identities’ belies music’s equal capacity, as part of a general campaign of sonic oppression, to displace or destruct identities (2002, p. 27). Citing historical cases where music has been used as a means of torture, they write: ‘Disempowerment and oppression can be brutally imposed through state terror, but they are quietly naturalised through the channels of everyday life and through means barely registered at the moment of their implementation’ (p. 37). This scene, which takes place at the very end of the film, and therefore marks the conclusion of the trilogy, clearly illustrates how state control over modes of expression continued during the post-Mao period.

Unlike the earlier films, in which the dissemination of official discourse comes mostly from audio sources, most of the of official voices in *Unknown Pleasures* are heard via news broadcasts shown on television sets in a range of different environments: in the home, the workplace and in public outdoor spaces. Beijing’s reaction to the discovery of an American surveillance plane in sovereign air-space, for example, is shown in Bin Bin’s mother’s apartment; in Xiao Ji’s father’s workshop (which is also their home), we hear of the arrests of Falun Gong protestors after setting themselves on fire in Tiananmen Square on 23 January 2000; we hear of the planned Beijing-Datong highway in a hairdresser’s salon and its successful completion later in the local police station; and, as mentioned above, on the street outside an open air pool hall, we witness the announcement of Beijing’s successful Olympic bid. Nonetheless it is through the evolving soundscapes of the era, whether broadcasts or pop songs, that the Hometown Trilogy conveys the mood of the period in which the films are set: post-revolutionary China. I have argued that by alerting us to the cultural politics embedded in the auditory realm, these films articulate the ‘struggle between authorised and unauthorised sound’ within social space, and at the same time, express the subversive potential of sound and music in creating ‘alternative and semiautonomous spaces’ (Revill, 2000, p. 602). Through my discussion of the films’ use of sound and music therefore, I hope to have demonstrated how these elements work together to articulate what Revill calls the ‘broader geography of sound’ by communicating the sonic experience of lived space during this turbulent period of China’s recent history.

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