

2006电影《天下无贼》笔记

A World without Thieves (2004), corporate culture for a pack of wolves

For Deng Xiaoping, the chief engineer of China's open-door and reform policies, society in the new era recognizes individual talents rather than political ideology. The spirit of the new culture is competition to see which cat catches most mice. For Feng Xiaogang, that competitive spirit animating the free market and corporate culture is referred and compared to gangs of thieves or packs of wolves. In his *A World without Thieves*, corporate cultures and private interest-groups are overrun with thieves, in contrast with the religion of Tibetan Buddhism, an advocacy of renunciation or succession of desire, greed and excess. This is the social, historical and cultural backgrounds, the film (天下無賊 *tian xia wu zei*) addresses the problems of crony capitalism when some state officials steal from the nation. Due to the politically sensitive nature and gravity of the issue, the director wisely creates a fascinating Buddhist miracle. Two highly skilled pickpockets achieve sudden enlightenment and risk their lives to protect the innocence as well as the hard-earned money of an idiot (Dumbo) who does not believe there are thieves in the world. An epic battle between good and evil soon begins when, instead of stealing Dumbo's money, Wang Bo and Wang Li try to protect him from other thieves on the train. This Buddha-like young man—Dumbo—is entirely unaware of thieves trying to rob him blind. Turning himself into a shepherd dog, thief Wang Bo robs the people who have robbed Dumbo and returns the money to its rightful owner. The action-packed train ride brings Buddhism as a moral perspective on a market society.

Tibetan Buddhism is the farthest thing from a liberal economy. For that reason, it can be a form of anachronism or a “lower” stage of cultural development that the civilized Han Chinese have a duty to raise to a “higher” plane. In this film, the Tibetans seem spiritually far nobler than Han consumers being corrupted by their economic transformation and urbanization. Feng is quick to give expression to the cultural sentiments of primitivism in which Tibet suddenly appears a paradise on earth, the last pure land and Shangri-La for the Chinese urbanites. Such attitudes toward the Tibetans and Tibetan Buddhism, as we have seen in *showers*, change over time, especially with Han culture becoming more connected to the global economy. The trip to Tibet is for Wang Bo and Wang Li to get rid of their stolen goods but it has become a pilgrimage away from modernity. It is in this place of pilgrimage that Wang Li, the female outlaw, pregnant by her partner in crime and accomplice, suddenly feels the need to quit her life of crime and repent in the name of her unborn child, (“我想為孩子積點德”). Her sudden moral awakening that there is something immoral (缺德) about the way they increase their wealth at the expense of others, allegorical of the ruthless competition and profit-driven marketplace that only rewards skills and talents but not moral virtues.

The train, an emblem of modern society, is teeming with thieves. “What is the most desired commodity in the twenty-first century?” says Uncle Li the head of one of the gangs of thieves on board, “It's talent”. Like the CEO of business corporations, Uncle Li (fox) recognizes talent and wants to recruit Wang Bo who has it. His remark underscores the going ethos of post-socialist China that is eager to reward talents but uninterested in morals or ideology. On the train, Dumbo (*sha gen*, literally “stupid roots”), a divine child trapped in a 21-year old body of a day laborer,

carries ¥60,000 yuan of his hard-earned money on his person. In the past five years when he has worked as a construction-worker, he befriended a pack of wolves that hang out near his worksite he is left alone to guard. His innocence, like that of Erming in *Shower*, is the key to personal integrity as Tibetan Buddhism is the key to salvation in the modern culture. In the context of



Buddhism, that salvation is defined as cessation of desires because cravings are the sources of human suffering. This is why Wang Li feels affinity with Dumbo as a brother and comes to see greed as a sin. Because Wang Bo has asked her that their child not to be born in prison, Wang Li leaves her newborn on the sacred ground of a Buddhist temple to be picked up by two Tibetan women, a perfect place for rebirth

and a new life, far from modernity and commerce. Dumbo is a figure of the primitive who represents Nature in its pristine and uncorrupted form. By protecting this divine child and living Buddha, the two pickpockets achieve their spiritual salvation. It is interesting to know that the psychic core of modern culture, driven by global commerce and advanced technology, is a “deepest sense of identity with the “primitive”, so much so that penitent thieves want to redeem themselves by dying for the less skillful and by choosing the less “civilized” to raise their child.

Such irrevocable and unambiguous identification with the primitive in fiction would make sense only if we can appreciate the inescapable impacts of urbanization and globalization on Chinese life. In other words, the Chinese attitude towards modernity or tradition is very ambivalent, as evident in the quarrel between the two thieves over what to do with Dumbo’s money, in similar way as the sharp disagreement between Tang and Song in the previous film *Blind Shaft* over whether they would kill children for economic self-survival. After Wang Bo robs the thieves who stole Dumbo’s money, he puts it in Wang Li’s purse and tells her it is time they take off, only to be opposed by Wang Li hoping to return the money to Dumbo as an act of contrition and renunciation of evil.

- Wang Li: When and if you take his money, it’s no difference from killing him.
- Wang Bo: On the contrary; I am giving him a new life.
- Wang Li: We’ve been traveling on this road for so long, Sha Gen (Dumbo/Roots) is

perhaps the only one who has no suspicion of others and no defense.

- Wang Bo: That’s why I must teach him a lesson. Why should he trust them? Why should he be immune to harm or injury? Is it because he is simple-minded or stupid? Why do you let him be stupid forever? Life demands that he wise up. As a human being, if you hide the truth from him, it is no different from deceiving him. What is evil? Deception is evil.
- Wang Li: You are full of shit.
- Wang Bo: Listen, even if you returned the money to him, he’ll never get it home.

- Wang Li: Let's do this: we return the money to him; I'll withdraw 60k from my credit card to pay you. Is it fair?

The exchange dramatizes divergent national attitudes to the economic reform that has created more disparity between the rich and poor. For the relatively well-off who think like Wang Bo, the reform through competition is not fast and thorough enough to produce more robust growth and teach the slow-minded. For people less able to compete such as Dumbo, the reform has robbed them of their basic human dignity and rendered them vulnerable to economic crimes. It seems to the gang of thieves on the train, Uncle Hu (Fox), Wang Bo and Wang Li, everything is fair game. Who refuses to accept poverty as a basic and inherent condition of humanity needs to wake up to the reality of how things are, on which Wang Bo believes that Dumbo needs to be taught a lesson. Should China stay economically underdeveloped, stagnant, egalitarian and isolated simply because there are risks and dangers in trying something new and different? Does the state have an obligation or responsibility to protect the economically disadvantaged or less fortunate such as Dumbo at the mercy of the jungle principle? What, if anything, are the moral and economic principles that business corporations must abide by as they seek expansion and profit? What policies are in place to ensure fairness and protect the private property rights of those like Dumbo whom Wang Bo refers to as "simple-minded and stupid"?

Taken to a deeper level, the problems of "economic reform" are not just greed and corruption. To some, reform is another name for redistributing the social wealth ill-gotten in the name of revolution. For these people who feel stolen from in a poorly regulated marketplace, the film really addresses the phenomenon of state capitalism. In an interview, Feng Xiaogang talks about his film as a reflection on the various acts of thievery in the nation, from petty pickpockets to government officials who embezzle billions, all manifestations of a moral crisis intensified by the transition from communism to capitalism as paradigms of modern economy. With the petty thefts staged in his film, Feng Xiaogang puts human faces to rampant white-collar crimes, as well as the poisonous effects of an under-regulated financial market. The idea of a marketplace as the site of stealing casts doubts not only on China's cultural stewardship but also on the benevolence of modern technologies that people often take for granted. Shot in Tibet (actually in the Province of Ganxu) as far away from economically more developed cities as possible, the film nonetheless prominently displays a whole slew of technological gadgets associated with industrial civilization: Nokia cellphone, Canon camera, BMW automobiles, Hewlett Packard laser printer and laptop. The film begins with a rich businessman learning English from Wang Li who will seduce him and extort money from him. Wang Bo records this married man having an extramarital affair on a Canon camera. As props, the computer products and items of high-tech innovations which are prominently displayed throughout the film and properly acknowledged as the sponsors of this film in the final credits are also parts of what Feng Xiaogang wants people to think about when reflecting on this capitalist revolution (including the English language). Is the quality of modern life really improved or diminished when people feel ever more insecure about their very existence? The seduction inside the opulent family mansion of this married businessman and the extortion that soon follows make people think critically about the bourgeois values of speed, proficiency, hedonism and individualism.

If the Chinese measure social progress by the level of material prosperity, they also need to know what values they must keep while achieving that prosperity through change. As Wang Bo and Wang Li get away from a gated residential area, the security guard at the entrance salutes the thieves as they drive off simply because they are inside a BMW. Such an instance of judging people by what they wear and drive enrages even cynical thief as Wang Bo scolds the security guard for his incompetence. In this story, as is in *Blind Shaft*, the moral issues are being raised by the most unscrupulous and cynical. Uncle Li who is the head and most skilled of the thieves holds in contempt those just like him but less artful and skillful. He says to the members of a gang of armed robbers, "I cannot stand you armed robbers, with no sterling work to show for your skills!" (我最討厭你們這些打劫的，一點技術含金量都沒有) This can be a sinister implication of the communist revolution as a violent way to redistribute land and property, inferior to the high tech mass deception to embezzle social wealth in the name of economic reform. It is Uncle Li, not the police who captures him, that spreads the gospel of market economy. He is the face to Chinese meritocracy and private business corporations. Packed with action and animations, the film entertains the critical perspective in which to understand the economic reform and some of the flaws of the neoliberal narrative and question the view that free market has lifted millions of Chinese out of poverty. The surreal story exposes capitalist market as responsible for the type of stealing that goes on as depicted in this multi-layered and multi-faceted film. The viewer, either the beneficiary or victim of the reform, is forced to face some of the problems of the post- socialist era, moral degradation, open corruption, cynicism and despair that plague China.