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The Eye of the Tiger, Amongst Other Animals: The Non-Chinese Viewer's Guide to the Symbolic Significance of Animals in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*

Kar Lok Pang, Columbia University, karlok.pang@columbia.edu

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Abstract

Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013) takes us through fictionalized accounts of four viral murder cases in China. While existing scholarship analyzing the film picks up Jia's social commentary and common themes with his previous productions, there is a lack of scholarship providing sociocultural contextualization of the film's cinematography, especially for the non-Chinese viewer. This essay argues that the film's usage of animal imagery is symbolically significant. In particular, the animal imagery is central to understanding the role of natural law and justice in China. On top of aiding understanding of lawlessness and the effects of capitalism across rural and urban China, attention to the literary references and linguistic wordplay uncovers representations of law, justice, and balance in Chinese society. Finally, the lens of animals contrasted against the film's central protagonists unveils interpretations of the futility of revolt against capitalism, and the ambiguous position of women in China.

Keywords: Chinese film; media; East Asian cinema; Asian film; China; animals on film

The Eye of the Tiger, Amongst Other Animals: The Non-Chinese Viewer's Guide to the Symbolic Significance of Animals in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*[1]

Kar Lok Pang

Introduction

The English title of Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013) evokes the title of iconic Chinese martial arts film *A Touch of Zen* (1971), which might lead the non-Chinese viewer to fall back on clichés surrounding Chinese martial arts films to understand Jia's production. Meanwhile, the film's Chinese title 《天注定》 translates to 'predestined by heaven' – an overt indictment of societal tensions precipitating the film's gore, suggesting that violence is predestined and inevitable. In anthological progression, Jia re-enacts fictionalized accounts of four viral murder cases in China: traveling across different provinces where countryside shots are punctuated with half-finished industrial projects, the rural-urban divide of Chinese development confronts law's civilizing effect. Yet, while Jia's social commentary is important and not unfamiliar to a Western audience if understood as belonging to the genre of problem-films,[2] the non-Chinese viewer can be helped to reach a more profound, and accurate, interpretation of *A Touch of Sin.*

Jia's work enjoys much fanfare within and outside of China. While his first three films were banned, *A Touch of Sin* was allowed to air in China. One explanation for this permission is that

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Jia has worked within the government system by submitting his films to nationally appointed censorship boards for review and approval. Another explanation is that the violence depicted in the film is already well-known to the informed viewer, who cannot have missed the four viral murder cases on Sina Weibo.[3] *A Touch of Sin* was nominated for the Palme d'Or at the 2013 Cannes Film Festival, and the script for the film won the award for best screenplay. However, critical analysis of the film has been mostly superficial. Film reviews tend to focus on the social commentary that Jia pushes so effectively, at the same time tying the film with Jia's other productions to find common themes. What is lacking is scholarship that provides adequate sociocultural contextualization of the film's cinematography for the non-Chinese viewer. In this essay, I characterize the non-Chinese viewer as someone who does not speak Chinese, and/or someone who is unfamiliar with Chinese culture in general. In fact, some film reviews even make honest mistakes in their interpretation of certain scenes and characters, given their unfamiliarity with the Mandarin Chinese language and contemporary Chinese culture.[4]

Perhaps *because of* rather than *despite* Jia's achievements as an acclaimed director and filmmaker, careful attention must be given to the film's cinematographic effects. One key element, which Jia sprinkles liberally throughout the film's cinematographic development, is the recurrent usage of animal motifs. I argue that the animal imagery offers revelations central to understanding the role of natural law and justice in China, that the non-Chinese viewer can

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uncover with some assistance. The film's portrayal of violence and disorder might be readily apparent; less obvious is what the literary references embedded within the animal imagery reveal about the underlying structures of law and order in Chinese society. Presuming that the informed non-Chinese viewer desires to engage critically with the film's cinematography, I present this essay as the non-Chinese viewer's guide to understanding the symbolic significance of animals in the film. This essay provides assistance in the form of translations, where necessary, of key Chinese phrases, names, and linguistic wordplays that feature in the film. Further, it provides explanations of the relevant sociocultural subtexts, be it linguistic, aesthetic, or literary in the broadest sense. Finally, this essay refers to the work of Chinese academics to supplement its analysis.

The Centrality Of Animal Motifs In Understanding Lawlessness And Capitalism

Every protagonist in *A Touch of Sin* navigates their own encounters with the law in different ways, even as they ultimately become "lawless" by committing murder in some form. Jia raises the question: If you are on the periphery and the law does not protect you, how easy is it to overstep that boundary to commit offences? More crucially, where/when do you stop once you have exceeded your breaking point? Starting with the opening scene, the gore in the first three minutes sets the tone for the in-your-face displays of violence that the film portrays. Much like a

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spaghetti Western, *A Touch of Sin* opens in Tarantino-style with migrant worker San'er (played by Wang Baoqiang) firing three shots in rapid succession at a group of bandits on the road. Nonetheless, the film presents San'er as a different kind of outlaw from that in Western films. Unlike in Western films, the pistol is not used to fire warnings, but to shoot to kill. The bandits tell San'er to 'stand right there!', yet San'er does not comply. Instead, he draws out a pistol while pretending to reach in his front pocket for what the bandits (and the viewer) presume to be his valuables.

The element of surprise, as San'er draws out a pistol instead of his valuables, highlights the ways in which his character embodies lawlessness. San'er is literally on the periphery of a winding mountain road in rural China. His character, as a migrant worker, drifts through different areas of China on a motorcycle. As revealed in the film's second act in Chongqing (West China),[5] San'er shoots a woman and her husband before snatching her handbag and fleeing the scene. In the film's trailer, one key scene depicts San'er's attempts to bond with his son on New Year's Eve, by firing a pistol at the sky during a fireworks display. San'er's wielding of the pistol stands in contrast to the bandits' axes in the opening scene. In rural China, guns may not as easily come into common ownership as they do in the United States. This sense of lawlessness conveys that San'er is a different kind of villain, even in the Chinese context (although, arguably, all villains are unusual and unexpected, at the periphery of any society). San'er's character is based on real-

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life murderer Zhou Kehua, nicknamed ‘Head Exploding Brother’ (爆頭哥) after his preferred way of finishing off his victims. While outlaws are historically deprived of the law’s protection, San’er still maintains his societal privileges. A later scene shows that he can discreetly purchase train tickets to three seemingly random locations in China. San’er’s societal status as a migrant worker makes his lawlessness undetected by law. As he is constantly on the move, San’er can continue to commit murder in a largely undetected fashion throughout China, disappearing before he is caught by the long arms of the law.

Dramatic Chinese folk music precedes San’er’s three connected and unflinching acts of murder in the opening scene. The music accompanies San’er as he drives through rural Shanxi, a landlocked province of Northern China that happens to be Jia’s home province. When San’er fires the first shot directly at the first bandit’s forehead, we see in the background that we are at 十八弯, a place that translates into ‘Eighteen Turns’. The name of the location, Eighteen Turns, alludes to a classic 20th century Chinese ‘Old Song’ (老歌) 《山路十八弯》, which translates to ‘Mountain Roads Along Eighteen Turns’. Sticchi argues that Jia’s cinematography is a critique of the ‘purest capitalism’ that is China today,[6] and we see how this plays out in the panning shot of half-finished infrastructure, when San’er regards the bandits. Throughout the film, the action unfurls amidst capitalistic undertones of industrializing rural China. It is no accident that the

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majority of the protagonists are migrant workers, albeit with different skillsets leading them to seek employment in different industries across rural and urban China.

Jia employs animal imagery from the very beginning of *A Touch of Sin*. San'er's Chicago Bulls wool hat nods to the pervasiveness of capitalism in all parts of China. His motorcycle is but one example of how traditionally agrarian provinces in rural China adapt to Western capitalism. San'er uses his motorcycle as an instrument of lawlessness, chasing the third bandit and eventually killing him through a shot to his back/chest. Drawing on the motif of the bull to understand San'er's character, the first thing that comes to mind is the rural-urban divide in China, as the bull represents an agrarian animal used for physical labor. In Chinese zodiac mythology, the bull finishes second in an epic race that determines the place and order of animals in the lunar calendar. As such, the bull is associated with dogged determination and hard work. Perversely, this understanding relates to San'er's determination not to let the bandit flee. He may not have killed the third bandit with "bull's eye" accuracy as the bullet was shot at the back/chest rather than the bandit's head, but the act of chasing the bandit down almost depicts San'er's enjoyment of the hunt itself. In the fireworks scene, San'er's proclamation that "Shooting guns isn't boring" confirms suspicions that he enjoys shooting a gun and, more insidiously, shooting to kill. Invoking the behavior of a bull driven to ferocity by the trigger of a

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waving red flag, Jia's answer to the question of "where/when do you stop once you have exceeded your breaking point?" is a scary "I don't know", at least in San'er's case.

San'er continues his journey on motorcycle after the final, perverse act of chasing the third bandit. It is at this point that San'er (and the viewer) comes across the protagonist of the first act, Dahai, who holds an orange in his hand. This anthological narrative style, where the movement of San'er's motorcycle segues into the film's first act, depicts lawlessness as roaming and on the move. Dahai is standing by a lorry that has toppled over. Workers unearth the pile of oranges to discover a dead body. The juxtaposition of the dead body, presumably an accident, with San'er's violent murdering spree is but one difference between these two characters. San'er's opening scene, however representative, does not distinguish him as the main protagonist. Rather, in many ways, Dahai is the main protagonist as his character stars in the first act. Jia's heavy-handed usage of animal motifs in *A Touch of Sin* links different characters to specific animals. Crucially, understanding the significance of these animal symbolisms can help explain why Dahai is set apart as the main protagonist. Dahai is a diabetic who struggles to contend with the blatant corruption he sees happening in his village. The straw that broke the metaphorical camel's (in Dahai's case, the tiger's) back is the moment when Dahai confronts a high official who is visiting the village. Dahai is beaten up bloodily with a steel bar after this confrontation, even as

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the high official smilingly promises to look into the corruption issue that Dahai brings to light, after being called out in front of the crowd. Embarking on his rampage, Dahai drapes a banner of a tiger over his rifle.

The first difference between Dahai and San'er is that a tiger is carnivorous, while a bull is herbivorous. Still, both can be ferocious when provoked. The viewer's initial impression of Dahai's character, enhanced by noticing the tiger motif, is that of bravery and nobility. Unquestionably, tigers are apex predators at the top of the food chain, so it is no surprise that San'er's opening scene gives way to the film's primary focus in its first act. That said, the choice of a tiger evokes mixed emotions in a Chinese spectator. On the one hand, the tiger placed third in the zodiac race after the bull. It is proverbially associated with villainy and corruption (为虎作帐), which are the things that Dahai struggles to fight against. On the other hand, tigers are regarded as auspicious animals because the striped pattern on top of their heads is similar to the Chinese character 王, which means 'king'. It is not uncommon in Chinese culture for families to plan children around their preferred zodiac animals. Paradoxically, the order in which these animals completed the race does not matter. The rat places first because it hitched a ride with the bull, the tiger places third, the rabbit fourth, the dragon fifth, and so on. Even then, Chinese families predominantly prefer the tiger and the dragon to the other animals in the first half of the lunar calendar.

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Dahai's character descends into lawlessness by turning into a vigilante. In contrast, the viewer does not get the backstory of San'er's shift towards lawlessness, which might support a sympathetic interpretation of Dahai given his position as the film's main protagonist. Dahai only takes things into his own hands after he repeatedly fails to persuade others in his village to join his cause. Blood splatters on pristine white snow outside the car – paralleling Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* – as Dahai refuses to give the corrupt high official a final chance at calm negotiations. Dahai is a blood-thirsty tiger on the prowl, more aptly so given that the rifle is probably a hunting rifle – this explains why nobody bats an eye when they see Dahai emerge with a rifle, until he fires it at *them*. Later, Dahai fires a shot at a man whom he saw earlier whipping a horse. The animal imagery and violence committed against animals throughout the film are therefore obvious issues that Jia directs the viewer's attention to. The above analysis of the film's opening scene and first act emphasizes the central role that Jia's usage of animal motifs plays, in terms of enhancing understanding of key themes such as the idea of lawlessness and the effects of capitalism across rural and urban China.

Literary References And Linguistic Wordplay Fleshed Out By Animal Imagery

Apart from elucidating the film's key themes, Jia's employment of animal imagery fleshes out literary references to religious customs, theatrical plays, and popular novels in China. These

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references are acknowledged by some existing scholarship, yet not enough discussion is directed towards how the animal imagery helps the viewer reach a more robust understanding of what the film's cinematographic effects communicate about each character. Alongside thinly veiled linguistic wordplay, these literary references uncover ideas of law, justice, and balance in Chinese society that may not be readily apparent to the non-Chinese viewer.

Music features prominently as an accompaniment throughout *A Touch of Sin*. Folk music accompanies the film's opening scene that introduces San'er; Dahai's act contains the musical arrangement of 《林冲夜奔》, a film title which translates to 'Lin Chong's night pursuit'.[7] Often, these music pieces reference famous literary works. For instance, the film *Pursuit* tells the story of an army chief in the Sung Dynasty, who embarks on a pilgrimage to exact vengeance on a corrupt minister who plots to kidnap his wife. The film was inspired by one of the "Four Great Chinese classic novels", 《水浒传》, which translates to 'water margin'. Literary references in *A Touch of Sin* directly parallel Dahai's character arc – his local crusade is inspired by the same anti-corruption vengeance as Lin Chong's 'pursuit'. In turn, knowledge of these literary references shapes the viewer's perception of each character's sense of agency. While every protagonist uncomfortably straddles the legal periphery separating living under oppression from committing offences against their perpetrators (ultimately crossing the line to commit murder), the literary references that Jia makes support the interpretation of inevitability behind each

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character arc. For the informed viewer, knowledge of famous Chinese literature leads to the understanding that the film's protagonists are tragically confined in the same way to the creative medium (novel, film, theatrical music) which their character draws inspiration from. Just as Lin Chong's life is predestined within the novel, Dahai's life is both affected and restricted by Lin Chong's plotline, even as the viewer sees it play out cinematographically on screen.

In other words, Jia suggests that Dahai is *predestined* to commit murder. Obviously, Jia directs this predestination in his screenwriting, but the literary references also recall the film's Chinese title, which translates to 'predestined by heaven'. Heaven determines the fate of these characters; their actions are all *predestined*. As Chinese historian Xu reminds us, the notion that heaven has all-seeing eyes has existed at least since imperial China.[8] For the Buddhist believer, heaven is omniscient and constantly making its own judgment. Meanwhile, belief in the idea of cosmic balance means that karma will take care of the perpetrators of injustice. Additionally, Confucian morality is informed by the hope (and even expectation) that 'justice should and will be done'. Xu demonstrates how such a moral belief has become codified in Chinese law and judicial practices, even as contemporary Chinese political and legal thinking continue to evolve, inflected by Western notions of law. However, the film's cinematography presents a more textured understanding of the interplay between religion, heaven, and karmic repercussions. On the one

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hand, the protagonists defy heaven's (and the law's) sovereignty by taking things into their own hands. In such a way, they reap and sow good or bad karma depending on their past and present actions. On the other hand, they also believe and justify, rightfully or otherwise, that it is heaven's will for them to commit murder. Concomitantly, the film offers the interpretation that each protagonist, like their literary counterparts, are predestined to do so.

Jia teases this conundrum of predestination through linguistic wordplay. In the first act, characters make references to 拜鬼 ('praying to ghosts and god for protection') and 问老天爷 ('ceding judgment to heaven'). Characters throughout the film readily draw on the idea of fate (缘), even if sometimes dismissively and without genuine belief. Nonetheless, the question of whether there is justice, in whatever sense of the word, is left open to the viewer. Specifically, the viewer decides if the means justify the ends for each protagonist. In the process of determining if justice has been adequately served, the viewer *becomes* heaven/the judge. I argue that the use of animal imagery enhances the cinematographic effects achieved by literary references and linguistic wordplay in the film. In particular, the viewer can better understand the film's conceptions of natural justice and balance through the animal imagery employed.

The third act introduces us to the film's first and only female protagonist, Xiaoyu. Based on the story of Deng Yujiao, Xiaoyu's character is a massage parlor receptionist working in Guangdong province (South China). The viewer has followed the film in traversing from Northern to

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Southern China. The act opens with Xiaoyu pleading with a man; it is revealed that she is in an extramarital affair with a Taiwanese factory owner. Chen's analysis encapsulates how the film references Xiaoyu's character to a snake in three pivotal ways.[9] Xiaoyu's first encounter occurs on her way to work, when she passes a truck boasting the abilities of a divine snake. Xiaoyu is dismissive of the truck's advertisement, or at least does not consider it helpful for her quest to "publicize" her underground romance.[10] The second incidence is when Xiaoyu comes face to face with a beautiful woman seated amidst a floor of writhing snakes at the back of the truck. Both women share a moment of solidarity by exchanging a silent glance of understanding. This time, Xiaoyu did not enter voluntarily. She was pursued by men hired by the wife of the Taiwanese factory owner, finding safety from their pursuit by escaping into the truck. The third occasion arises when the camera follows Xiaoyu's walk on the highway. The viewer sees, as Xiaoyu does, a snake emerging and slithering into a strip of grass by the highway.

To the non-Chinese viewer, the imagery of snakes is reminiscent of Eve's temptation and biblical connotations associated with original sin. However, the concept of sin is arguably a foreign one to China. There is no equivalent to natural law, at least from a religious perspective, in China. This may be because the origination of law in China differed from European, Indian, and Middle Eastern civilizations in that it did not emerge from religious institutions. In the film,

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the camera lingers on an oil painting of Saint Maria in the first act, contrasting it against shots of subsequent statues: the Buddha, Goddess of Mercy, and Mao Zedong. This illustrates a mixed picture of the religious underpinnings of sin, both in the film and in contemporary Chinese society. The film's portrayal of characters who draw on the idea of heaven's judgment is complicated by how traditional Christian conceptions of sin are sullied by Buddhist and Confucianist moral beliefs. Officially, China is atheist, but religious expression remains limited, albeit not explicitly banned.

I propose that the animal imagery helps us understand Chinese ideas of natural justice and balance, outside of religious conceptions of sin. Xiaoyu's act references the romantic fantasy film 《青蛇》, which translates to 'green snake'. Although not explicitly mentioned, Xiaoyu's character brings to mind caricatures of 白蛇传, a Chinese legend of the white snake that has been popularized and reproduced in Chinese operas, films, and television series. Chen argues that snakes are flexible creatures, able to adapt to ebbs and flows while preserving their ability to retaliate after being attacked several times. Chen is corroborated by Cao, who believes that animals such as snakes are not sly but morally ambivalent in Chinese culture.[11] Cao illuminates how, in traditional Chinese philosophy and law, there is no clear dichotomy between humans and animals. Notwithstanding, Chinese practices and beliefs adopted ambivalent attitudes regarding non-humans. Often, these practices and beliefs were predicated on the practical utility of the

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animals. Traditional Chinese medicine considers that the more poisonous the snake, the more health benefits it would bring when ingested. The snake thus occupies a morally grey position in Chinese culture. In fact, it finished sixth out of twelve animals in the Zodiac race – right in the middle of the leaderboard.

Besides utility, snakes are specifically linked to femininity, which encourages a gendered viewing of the film's third act. Xiaoyu and the unnamed woman at the back of the truck relate to the Chinese goddess Nvwa. Nvwa, a female with the body of a snake, features prevalently in totem worship in primitive tribalistic society. The snake emblematically alludes to a particularly Chinese sense of balance. In relation to law, snakes are symbolic of the uncertain position of natural justice and conceptions of sin in China. As Chou's translation of Hu's historical exploration of natural law (天理) in China describes, concepts related to natural law have always played a role in the struggle against injustice, oppression, and tyranny in China.[12] Snakes are linked to femininity, which presupposes beauty and grace, yet the Chinese (and men in relation to women) remain wary of snakes for their cunning and venomous qualities. In this regard, the film's choice of employing CGI effects over using live snakes is telling. While the presumption that live snakes are more unpredictable to work with cannot be proved, Jia did use a trained horse

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for Dahai's act. Cinematographically, CGI generates a sense of artificiality, which further amplifies the moral ambiguity of snakes and Xiaoyu's character.

In the fourth act, Jia masterfully ties in the film's anthology while introducing Chinese ideas of cosmic balance. The Taiwanese factory owner who is having an affair with Xiaoyu is introduced to Xiaohui. Xiaohui is a migrant worker from Hunan who fleets between different jobs, falls in love, and ultimately commits suicide. Xiaohui's character is seen releasing goldfish into a pond, in a Buddhist practice known as 放生, which translates to 'releasing for survival'. It can be inferred that Xiaohui and his female love interest are the goldfish, who need release from the captive system of capitalism in order to survive. The Buddhist practitioner regards acts of religious atonement as a means to restore karmic balance to the cosmos. Once again, the animal imagery reveals greater depth. Goldfish symbolize wealth and prosperity in Chinese culture, yet in this Buddhist context the fish may not even "prosper" after release. While the practitioner considers the practice a good deed to counterbalance bad karma amassed from the exploitative nature of their work, releasing non-native wildlife has adverse effects on local biodiversity. Chen recognizes this harsh reality, reading Jia's depiction of this practice as a prelude to Xiaohui's suicide. The viewer comes to terms with the harshness and brutality of life in the animal kingdom, no matter how each protagonist seeks to counterbalance evil with good. Overall, the animal imagery enhances the film's portrayal of violence and oppression. Through understanding

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the significance of this imagery, the informed viewer becomes cognizant of the nuances embedded within Jia's cinematography as social commentary.

The Eye Of The Tiger (And Other Animals): A Closer Look At Animals In Acts One And Three

Thus far, I have covered how the centrality of animal motifs is central towards understanding the film's themes of lawlessness and its critique of capitalism. The previous section built upon this discussion by investigating how the animal imagery fleshes out Chinese ideas about law, justice, and balance which may be unfamiliar to the non-Chinese viewer. Through the lens of contrasting animals, this final section ties up the analysis by taking a deep dive into two specific acts: the tiger/horse in act one, and the snake/monkey in act three.

The significance of the animal imagery employed for each scene is reflected not only in the animal traits that each character supposedly represents. A scene in the second act shows a duck being killed by letting blood drip out from its neck. The duck is helpless and unable to fight back. Chen argues that San'er becomes the 'duck-killer': in pretending to reach for his wallet and instead withdrawing a pistol to methodologically shoot the three bandits one-by-one, San'er demonstrates the same indifference and disregard for the sanctity of life. Looking at the animals that are contrasted *against* the protagonists, such as the duck vis-à-vis San'er's embodiment of

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the bull, can then unveil more subtle interpretations of their underlying motivations. I argue that understanding Dahai as a horse rather than a tiger is more faithful to Jia's intentions.[13] Meanwhile, employing a gendered reading of Xiaoyu, paralleled by the monkey, reveals the ambiguous position of women in contemporary China.

Jia distinguishes Dahai and Xiaoyu in several ways. A lot of the wordplay in the film revolves around Chinese characters that contain the character for fire (火). There is meaning each time fire is referenced in *A Touch of Sin*. A character asks San'er to lend him a lighter (借个火), which San'er does not have. What the viewer knows, though, is that San'er has a pistol that is more powerful and destructive than a lighter. As discussed, one of San'er's scenes involves firework (放炮), which can be translated as setting off fireworks, but also to set off a cannon/gun/flare. 放炮 has another colloquial meaning, to shoot off one's mouth – which is what Dahai does, precipitating his moral corruption and murderous rampage. Fire is associated with *yang* (masculine) energy, as opposed to *yin* (feminine) energy. This often mandates balance in Chinese culture. Popular belief considers that allowing a single element to dominate can result in disaster. Jia presents Dahai and Xiaoyu as a counterbalance to fire in the film. Xiaoyu translates to 'jade' (玉), whose Chinese character contains a water droplet. Similarly, Dahai translates to 'big sea' (大海), which obviously contains water. Already, Xiaoyu is set apart as the film's only female protagonist. Further, she makes the only speech reference to the film's

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Chinese title, and relies on a knife instead of gunfire for murder. Meanwhile, the blood that splatters on Xiaoyu's white shirt directly parallels blood splattering on snow in Dahai's final scene. Both get hit repeatedly prior to their outbursts.

Haunting moments abound in Dahai's act. Preceding Dahai's witnessing of a horse being flogged, Dahai spectates a police check at the factory he works at. Random numbers assigned to different migrant workers are called. The camera pans to the expressionless face of a young man, breathing through his mouth. He bolts. A policeman fires a warning shot before giving chase. Dahai flinches at the gunshot sound. Dahai's murderous rampage after he kills the village chief includes the horse flogger as one of his casualties. Now freed, the wagonless horse is last seen trotting aimlessly across the road towards the end scene. Compared to other animals, the tiger lacks a physical manifestation in the film. We only hear its roar as Dahai drapes the banner over himself. At first glance, the viewer believes, as Dahai does, that he represents the tiger. However, Dahai is actually the horse. In ancient China, horses were only owned and used by the rich for transportation. Horses continue to be exploited in contemporary society, as seen in the practice of horse racing. Dahai flinches when he witnesses violence. Despite campaigning against corruption, he too suffers as a victim even *after* his cathartic murders.

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In another scene, Dahai shoots a man, juxtaposed against the backdrop of a Buddhist temple. The viewer sees ten animals – none of which are the tiger or the horse – on top of the temple's roof. The roof symbolizes the hat worn by ancient court judges and officials, which is in turn a symbol of justice. The exclusion of the animals related to Dahai's character hints that heaven does not approve or predestine Dahai's murders, no matter how much he believes this to be the case. In the final blood splattering scene, Dahai refuses to settle matters peacefully because he knows there will be no real change. He exceeds his breaking point in trying to enact a twisted kind of justice. Yet, the end scene of the aimless horse reflects how Dahai's fate is resolved. Dahai is not a tiger because he does not emerge triumphant over his troubles. Like the horse, Dahai is temporarily free from his burdens, but at what cost? Crucially, has justice really been dealt? The pervasiveness of capitalism in China will only enslave another horse, another Dahai, and any lawless subjugation will be for naught.

As the sole female protagonist, Xiaoyu breaks the public/private and urban/rural barriers. Xiao notes that Xiaoyu's gendered prominence is in line with her role in Jia's previous films,[14] but close attention to the monkey vis-à-vis the snake tells us the ambiguity of Xiaoyu's position in society. Xiaoyu represents an urban migrant woman in Southern China, one who can send her male lover off instead of being sent off. She lives independently in a city, but her actions are dictated by male power. In China, marriage is a symbol of success. Xiaoyu, the other woman,

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has no status in society. This inversion of genders is present in other scenes as well. In the first act, a high official and his wife visit Dahai's village. A boy presents flowers to the official's wife, while a girl presents flowers to him. Concomitantly, there is an obvious gender imbalance within spheres of public/private divisions of authority in the film.

Another animal that appears in Xiaoyu's act is the monkey. Contrasted against the neat carnivore/herbivore distinction between Dahai's animalistic contrasts, the monkey is notably omnivorous. Monkeys are intelligent and mischievous, sharing much of the snake's cunning. In China, the Monkey King is revered and worshipped, despite causing much destruction in fables. Nonetheless, monkeys are choice animals for circus training, and their brains are a rare delicacy in China. This ambiguous position parallels Xiaoyu's negotiation of status as a single woman in China. Xiaoyu's murder comes after she overhears an animal documentary, where she learns that animals can commit suicide like humans. While not part of her job, Xiaoyu's workplace is where men hit her for not giving them massage services. Xiaoyu's murder weapon, a knife, was accidentally acquired from her affair, implying that women become "dangerous" by happenstance. Women are also less dangerous than men with guns. Like her affair, China's problems cannot be delayed any longer. That said, resolution is mixed. On the one hand, Xiaoyu ultimately and unsatisfactorily calls the police to turn herself in. On the other hand, the film's

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closing scene harks back to a sandstorm in Shanxi, where Xiaoyu seeks to begin a new life as a factory worker by hiding her past.

Despite leaving more questions than answers, understanding prominent characters such as Dahai and Xiaoyu not only through the eyes of their obvious animalistic counterparts, but also the animals they are contrasted against, can uncover more subtle messages of capitalism and gender in China. For Dahai, he remains as aimless as a horse. Meanwhile, Xiaoyu continues to renegotiate her position in society by reinventing another persona.

Conclusion

To conclude, this essay argues that the film's heavy-handed usage of animal imagery provides key revelations central to understanding the role of natural law and justice in China. As some references embedded within the employment of animal motifs may not be readily apparent to the non-Chinese viewer, this essay has provided sociocultural contextualization of the film's cinematography in three parts. The first section discussed San'er and Dahai as examples of how animal imagery and violence against animals are depicted in the film. I emphasized that the animal imagery is central towards understanding the film's key themes of lawlessness and the effects of capitalism across rural and urban China. In the second section, I covered the literary references associated with animals throughout the film, uncovering representations of law, justice, and balance in Chinese society. Beyond enhancing the film's portrayal of violence and

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oppression, attention to the literary references and linguistic wordplay embedded within the animal imagery informs the non-Chinese viewer's interpretation of Jia's cinematography as social commentary. In the final analysis, I present Dahai and Xiaoyu as the film's central protagonists, arguing that looking at the animals they are contrasted *against* can unveil subtle interpretations of their underlying motivations.

Overall, *A Touch of Sin* paints a complex picture of lawlessness, capitalism, justice, and law in contemporary China. The protagonists struggle against heaven's predestination in profound ways, that can be better understood by looking at the significance of animal imagery that the film draws on via various means.

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ENDNOTES:

[1] [Editor's note]: CINEJ is proud have another excellent article on Chinese cinema. The most recent contribution was Park (2022).

[2] Gans, Herbert J. "The Rise of the Problem-Film: An Analysis of Changes in Hollywood Films and the American Audience." *Social Problems* 11, no. 4 (1964): 327–36.

[3] Sina Weibo has a similar application layout to Instagram and Twitter. It is China's largest social media platform after Tencent's WeChat.

[4] Without namedropping, one review fails to recognize that a character in the first act is Dahai's mother.

[5] Drawing an unexpected parallel to how San'er's character both embodies lawlessness and defies some traditions of Western films.

[6] Sticchi, Francesco. "China Is Purest Capitalism: The Cinema of Jia Zhangke." *Mapping Precarity in Contemporary Cinema and Television*, 2021, 163–75.

[7] The official English translation is just 'pursuit'.

[8] Xu, Xiaoqun. *Heaven Has Eyes: A History of Chinese Law*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2020.

[9] Chen, Juan. 陈娟. 《天注定》影片中动物形象的符号化解读[J]. 电影评介, 2014(17): 26-27.

[10] "Publicize" is an awkward translation of the Chinese term "公开" ('bring to light'). Xiaoyu intends to make her illicit relationship societally acceptable, pleading with her partner to either leave his wife or end the affair.

[11] Cao, Deborah. "Visibility and Invisibility of Animals in Traditional Chinese Philosophy and Law." *International Journal for the Semiotics of Law - Revue internationale de Sémiotique juridique* 24, no. 3 (2010): 351–67.

[12] Chou, Chih-P'ing. "The Natural Law in the Chinese Tradition." *English Writings of Hu Shih*, 2012, 217–34.

[13] Chen, Lux, Cynthia Rowell, and Jia Zhangke. "Searching for Dignity in the Ocean of People: An Interview with Jia Zhangke." *Cinéaste* 44, no. 2 (2019): 22–25.

[14] Xiao, Jiwei. "China Unraveled: Violence, Sin, and Art in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin*." *Film Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (2015): 24–35.

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