

# 铁一道

## THE IRON MINISTRY

### director q & a

Director J.P. Sniadecki answers questions about the making of THE IRON MINISTRY in an interview with *Cinema Scope* editor and Locarno Head of Programming Mark Peranson.

**MP:** *What were you trying to accomplish when you set out on a three-year journey on the Chinese train system with your camera?*

**JPS:** It's not so much what I was trying to accomplish, but what came out of the encounters between the many elements that went into the making of the film. The classic, iconic, and clichéd encounter between the railways and cinema; the encounter between human beings and the physical/architectural space of each train car (and how that encounter shapes bodies, postures, gestures, interactions, etc); the encounters between passengers—and between passengers and the filmmaker—within the fleeting social space that each train car creates; the encounters between ideologies, motivations, aspirations, and values within those encounters; and the encounter between a filmmaker and a small hand-held consumer camera and the cinematography that it produced. To capture as many different encounters as possible, I took trains throughout China, striving to be thorough without a need to be exhaustive, compelled more by the desire for movement and encounter than by any documentary notion of “coverage.” So I hopped on trains in many different corners of China, as well as through the major arteries of the railway system. Some rides were 40+ hours, others were 20 minutes, and I never had a clear goal for each journey. I'd seen Ning Ying's RAILROAD OF HOPE five or six years before and wanted to avoid a “premise” or a “central question” to structure the film, as she had. It was all a journey and, like most journeys, the important thing was discovery.

**MP:** *What was the editing process like?*

**JPS:** In the editing, I compressed scores of rides into one train-ride experience, blurring the lines and distinctions. The montage of THE IRON MINISTRY constructs a singular train, as only through cinema can the old collectivist era “green skin” trains be directly coupled to not only the later air-conditioned “red skin” trains but also the newest high-speed bullet trains of today. As this cinema-train traverses the vast interiors of China, the camera also traverses a visual history of Chinese railway technology and infrastructure. Despite the process of steadily phasing out older “green skin” trains (the train from Zizhong to Chengdu with the meat sellers and the peasants loaded with produce has already been eliminated), the coexistence and varied use of technologies belonging to different eras comes in and out of

focus throughout the journey.

I had shot hours and hours at train stations, on the platforms, and at railways in the middle of mountains and cities and tundras, but in the end elected to constrain the film to footage taken only within the body of the train. I also limited the times the camera moves towards the window, or even gazes out the window, and placed those shots in such a way that there is a long period without any window view, and then, when it does appear, it gradually moves from abstraction towards more and more concrete and panoramic. This serves to focus on the social spaces, the claustrophobia, the basic fact of being forced to deal with one another, with cramped and common humanity, all stuffed together into a train headed to who knows where.

**MP:** *You mentioned the abstract shot out of the window, which comes about halfway through the film, which appears to be edited together from multiple shots and could almost be a short film in itself. Can you address how and why you combined more “experimental” parts with the more traditionally shot conversations?*

**JPS:** On a 40-hour train ride, you have a lot of time to experiment and to get to know the train in ways beyond the immediately apparent. So through the lens and the microphone I could explore the machinery and environment of the train, put my camera in spaces I might not at first think of, and record the incredibly rich and varied sounds that trains produce. And even though there's a diverse range of landscapes and urbanity seen from a train window in China, shooting all that with a faithfulness to landscape portraiture can quickly become prosaic and uninteresting. And since the film is also a register of an unease and anxiety produced by development, technology, and scientism, I began to experiment with ways to shoot out the window that might echo that psychology. Changing focal lengths, soft focus, sudden movements, shifting shutter speeds... The shot I believe you are referring to is a product of these experiments and is actually one shot, not multiple shots edited together.

Formally, the film focuses on the sensorial, the experiential, and the aesthetics of everyday, but does not do so at the expense of either the verbal or the experiences of the actual pressures, anxieties, hopes, and questions that are very much present for individuals in Chinese society. The conversations in the film often turn to topics that dominate daily life in China: housing prices, prospects for livelihood, the rising costs of goods, personal happiness, the speed of change, the fate of the nation, etc. Regarding the range of conversations that are in the film, I did not want to shy away from the streams of human speech that animate train rides. I wanted to make a film that, at some point, could burst forth with language, find a balance between speech and gesture, and embrace train travel babble. I didn't want to tie the film down to one formal device or one monolithic tone. And so, in a way, it is a shape-shifting film, one that transmutes and transforms given the shifting conditions as we are transported through, and transformed by, space and time.

I don't know if the conversations are “traditional” in the way they are shot. I don't know many other nonfiction films that shoot conversations from a similar proximity, and with similarly long takes, and allow for as much spontaneity and digression. Chris Marker and Pierre L'Homme's *LE JOLI MAI*, and Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin's *CHRONICLE OF A SUMMER* come to mind, and I am sure there are others, but the conversations in those films are much more directed, arranged, edited, and pursuant of a question. The way I shot the conversations in *THE IRON MINISTRY* is more an outcome of the conditions and contingencies at play in the moment of recording—the architectural space of the train, the dynamics of the social situation, the moods of the individuals involved, etc. The camera becomes a participant in the

situation, as do I, and the act of filming often initiates discussion, but then the exchange takes over and the presence of the camera and me slide back and forth between observing and participating as the discussion unfolds. The camera reacts and responds, and definitely amplifies and augments aspects of the discussions, but does not arrange and direct to achieve a formal coherency or documentary standard.

Trains are places of fleeting exchange and interaction, temporary social spaces often composed of groups of strangers, and so some of the conversations are mundane on the surface, some are more pointed and compelling in articulation, but all of them are revelatory. Sometimes the actual semantics of what is said is not entirely important. What is going on within the social situation, or what can be gleaned from a close-up of a face, or what unspoken sentiment is behind what is actually stated, gives some of the conversations a considerable and telling depth beyond the words themselves. I am not sure how much of this is legible to non-Chinese speakers, especially because their eyes are likely focused more on the subtitles than on the faces and expressions of the speakers, but I do trust that in the more obvious cases, such as the conversation between the two Hui Muslim young men and the two Han Chinese men, viewers can catch some of the complexities of the interactions.

**MP:** *Do you consider the film to be political? Politics comes in most specifically in the second half of the film, where there is a discussion about progress...*

**JPS:** I think the film is political in the stripped down way it was made more than anything else. In this way, it is aligned with the minimalist, small-scale approach of my colleagues in both China's independent documentary community (directors such as Xu Xin, Feng Yan, Wang Wo, Zhao Liang, Zhu Rikun, just to name a few) and the Sensory Ethnography Lab (Lucien Castaing-Taylor, Verena Paravel, Stephanie Spray, Ernst Karel). Despite their different approaches and backgrounds, both groups of filmmakers present an alternative to mainstream production, and in this alternative, you have a politics that imagines and posits other possibilities for cinema, and for cultural production in general.

But, within THE IRON MINISTRY itself, there are also countless relationships to Chinese politics—and geopolitics as well—that ripple out from the lives of the passengers, impacting and shaping the film itself. I was trying to bring together my affinity for trains—especially Chinese trains, where I first learned the Chinese language back in 2000—with a portrait of a smoldering unease and uncertainty that ramifies out towards questions of society, economy, sovereignty, and technology, among many other things. This unease and uncertainty often expresses itself as a prevailing anxiety over the future of the self, ethnicity, and the nation. As a force below the surface, it is not immediately apparent, but it's a palpable subtext to the conversations and interactions throughout the film. Of course, a portrait of anxiety is not something I set out to capture while riding the rails, and “unease” and “uncertainty” are not the only subjects of the film. But these experiences and questions were already there, latent within the psychological tone of many of the journeys, informing interactions and creating particular atmospheres.

I also wanted to challenge viewers with precisely what constitutes an everyday interaction in China. Now obviously this works differently for different audiences (ie: Chinese nationals, international festival audiences, etc.), but I hope the film pushes viewers to revisit their assumptions about Chinese politics—one of which is the simple idea that the Chinese are not political or that they are simply dominated. or whatever. Instead, the film offers we see here a range of powerful and cogent voices. While somemany of these voices point to overtly

political issues in China—Uyghur/Han chasms, Tibet, authority, massive inequality—what also comes across is how such issues are woven into both everyday experience and larger global problems. Here China is not the rogue State it is often presented as, and instead is grappling with privatization, growing wealth gaps, consumer citizenship, etc. Indeed, one of the ironies of the film, perhaps, is that against this backdrop China is making huge investments in social infrastructure...while I can hardly get a train to anywhere in much of my own country.

On the other hand, rather than present an uncritical visual history of technological progress in accord with the overtly scientific worldview of China's leadership, *THE IRON MINISTRY* evokes the risks and dangers that development efforts and narratives inherently introduce despite the common perception of progress as always offering a better, safer, and fairer world. The film's depiction of the high-speed train hinges on ambiguity. On one level, the trains' sleek lines and sheer velocity render them as vehicles belonging to a science-fiction flick. Yet, on another level, they also produce unease over safety concerns and the inevitable breakdown of all things mechanical. Also, in contradistinction to the intense sociality of the older trains where passengers sit facing one another, sharing sunflower seeds and swapping stories, or just passing out on one another's shoulders, the cabins of the bullet trains create a different, more distant form of sociality, one marked by private space, screen culture, and heightened space-time compression.

**MP:** *To what extent were you trying to depict a cross-section of the Chinese population, to make a film that encapsulates the concerns of all of China today?*

**JPS:** My hope was actually to depict a cross-section of the different trains operating within the Ministry of Railways, and the different carriage spaces of each class on the train. In focusing on the infrastructure and environment, on the trains themselves, though, I inevitably filmed with individuals from different geographies, social classes, ages, ethnicities, and personalities. But I don't think *THE IRON MINISTRY* delivers a "cross-section" in any sociological sense of the word, nor does it fully capture the diversity within China. But it does at least evoke that wide-ranging social and cultural diversity: peasants and urbanites, laborers and intellectuals, Han Chinese and ethnic minorities (such as the Hui Muslim men, the Uyghur Muslim who is accosted by the train policeman, and the Tibetan intellectual). These vast disparities in class and culture, which we all know are a dimension of Chinese society, are nonetheless made more vivid and apparent within the space of the cinema-train.

**MP:** *Most people that you talk to are eager participants, and seem glad to appear on camera, but we see at times that you're asked to stop filming, and the railway employee seems nervous when you tell him that your camera records sound. What kind of problems did you encounter when shooting?*

**JPS:** On every train ride I was prevented from filming either by a worker or the train chiefs themselves. Every time, without fail. And the reactions and reasons were varied. Sometimes they would politely ask me to stop and cite the Ministry's regulations forbidding filming on trains without the approval and support of the "higher-ups." Other times they were more aggressive. Sometimes they'd erase the SD cards, or ask me to delete particular shots, or just bar me from filming entirely. Sometimes I could strike up a compromise by telling the train chief that he or she could go through all my footage after the journey and erase whatever footage was deemed problematic. The workers and chiefs were more concerned about keeping their jobs than anything else, although sometimes they stopped me from filming

simply because passengers were espousing aggressive and nationalist viewpoints on camera. In recent years there have been videos made by citizens and posted on Youku (China's censored version of Youtube, since Youtube is blocked by the internet police in China) to expose abuses of power on the trains, so their concern and paranoia were not unwarranted. A foreigner with a camera is no less a liability, and so anyone concerned about job security would naturally make sure to quell the potential for damage wrought by an errant video that might defame the Ministry and attract disciplinary attention to them. I was able to film with the train workers that do appear in the film only through sheer luck or forming a friendship. Some workers were so curious about life in the United States, especially the housing market and the cost of goods, that once they discovered I speak Chinese, they were eager to talk.

**MP:** *Can you address the film's sound and sound design? It seems incredible that these people can get any sleep with all of that constant racket*

**JPS:** I never sleep as well as I do when on trains. Of course, the early morning announcements and the stream of pop songs (both Chinese and foreign) can sometimes be an obstruction to sleep, but the constant, throbbing bass rhythms of the train have always lulled me to sleep. And I am not alone: several people I met on the trains told me they prefer riding trains over taking buses or flying because on the long train journeys they can escape from the pressures of work and family and fall into a deep sleep.

The vast majority of the sound is sync with the image at the moment of recording. The camera I used has a consumer 5.1 surround sound microphone, and in the post-production mix Ernst Karel and I were curious as to what palette this microphone might give us. In Ernst's words:

"We wanted to make the most of the 5.1 sound that the camera recorded, playing the instrument of the camera in that sense, shaping the camera sound to make the most of it, by changing the balance or EQ of the various channels. But at the same time there were shots where the action/dialogue was focused in front, and so in those cases we either removed the rear channels or replaced them with other train sounds."

Ernst is an amazing sound artist, and I have informal training in music as well, so we approached the film's sound design as a sonic composition. Attention to attack, release, resonant frequencies, atmosphere, dynamic range, and tonality all played a part in the design. We were open to and excited about the musicality of the train itself, whether by including songs actually played and recorded on the train, or by using the train sounds themselves to compose something akin to "musique concrete." We also pulled some inspirations from existing music genres: I recorded the film's intro and outro sounds of train brakes long and shrill in a train yard, and we arranged them so as to resemble something akin to *Togaku* from the Tang Dynasty (which is better known today as Japanese *Gagaku* court music). Ernst added analog electronic and other train recordings to the shots of the high-speed train so as to lend the ending an unsettling tonality, an electroacoustic movement towards the more abstract ending.

**MP:** *Finally, why did you title the work THE IRON MINISTRY?*

**JPS:** The title has a fairly wide range of meanings. "Iron" refers, on one level, to the railways, the railroad, trains, etc. On another level it refers to notions of development, progress, and

modernity. On yet another, more indirect level, it refers to the governmentality of the Chinese Communist Party: the “iron bowl” of collectivism (which supposedly provided food for everyone) and the continued “iron fist” of social control, despite its efforts to develop soft power.

“Ministry,” on one level, refers to a department of the government, specifically to the Ministry of Railways, which was considered a secretive yet expansive “kingdom unto itself” within a government known for its opacity. The Ministry of Railways had its own schools, courts, housing, factories, police force, etc, but that is all over now. It seems fitting that the three years spent shooting this film also coincided with the last three years of the Ministry’s reign as a separate world: in March 2013, after high-level cases of corruption, it was officially dissolved and transformed into a state-owned entity, the China Railways Corporation. Control over the corporation is said to be divided between China’s high elites, and how this transformation will change the railways is still an open question, though there has been ongoing privatization and expansion. Drawing from all this and returning to the title, on another level “Ministry” here refers to belief, religion, and ideology, a kind of encompassing moral world. And thus, finally, it also refers to the “mission” process of spreading an ideology, a scientism, and an instrumental morality throughout the land.