

Historical Reflection in Jia Zhangke's Films: The Connection between Geoculture and Social Change in China

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Abstract

Jia Zhangke's artistic trajectory from the 1990s to the present closely reflects China's evolving socio-political landscape during the period of reform and opening up. The recording and reflection of societal shifts, encompassing macro and meso perspectives, are central to his creative endeavours. The artist's work effectively portrays the broad transformations in the nation's image, social systems, structures, stratification, and institutions. On a mesoscopic level, the microcosmic portrayal explores specific individuals' evolving lifestyles and ideologies. The process of societal progress is a collective endeavour, but the delay in adapting to new systems can cause individuals to feel a deep sense of disconnection. Jia Zhangke's film "Images of the County" is a significant narrative in Chinese cinema, exploring societal transformation, individual destinies in changing times, and capturing the spirit of the Chinese nation. Jia Zhangke challenges the conventional boundaries between documentary and fiction through his skilful manipulation of reality's nuances. The artist demonstrates exceptional sensitivity and mastery by placing contemporary individuals within historical settings, creating a powerful depiction of individual lives within changing historical periods.

Keywords: Jia Zhangke, Film, Social Change, Geoculture.

Introduction

During the 1980s and 1990s, a literary movement called "scar literature" and "root literature" emerged in China, which had a significant influence on both literature and filmmaking (Guo, 2007; Liang, 2016). The literary schools known as "Scar literature" and "Root seeking literature" emerged as significant movements in Chinese literature during the 1980s and 1990s. The term "scar literature" encompasses the portrayal of historical trauma and suffering in literary works. This literary genre frequently explores historical events in China during the first half of the 20th century, particularly focusing on political movements and social unrest that occurred during the Cultural Revolution. The literature on root seeking examines the concept of individual and ethnic identity, specifically the exploration and identification of individuals with their cultural traditions and historical origins. Scar literature and root-seeking literature are significant literary schools in Chinese literature. These works concentrate on historical wounds and personal identity concerns, examining and representing Chinese society and culture through literature. The period saw the emergence of notable cinematic masterpieces such as "Yellow Earth" and "Red Sorghum" which reflected the prevalent societal upheavals and historical consciousness. Publications such as *World Cinema* and *Cinema Art* contributed to the reassessment of cinematic realism by translating articles like "Reviewing Italian Neorealism after Twenty Years" and "The Inheritance of Italian Neorealism" (Hu & Chen, 2021; Lu Sun, 2022). The resurgence of realism in Chinese cinema led to the rise of the fifth and sixth generations of filmmakers.

The fifth-generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, primarily explored expansive rural settings in their films. In contrast, the sixth-generation directors, including Jia Zhangke, Ning Hao, and Lu Chuan, shifted their focus to the outskirts of urban areas and characters who are socially marginalised. Their works explored the challenging aspects of modern society, providing insightful observations on personal hardships in the face of societal changes (Kyong-McClain et al., 2022; Lo, 2020). The films of the sixth-generation directors initially encountered difficulties in gaining mainstream

acceptance, despite their innovative storytelling and unique styles. This was primarily because these films deviated from the prevailing cinematic norms (Pugsley, 2016).

The Chinese cinema of the 1980s and 1990s displayed a notable inclination towards expansive productions and ambitious narratives, as exemplified by Zhang Yimou's film "Raise the Red Lantern." Contrarily, the films of Jia Zhangke and his peers faced challenges in gaining popularity in the mainstream market. For instance, "Three Steps to My Hometown" was initially limited to underground screenings (Yang, 2018). Nevertheless, due to changing preferences of Chinese viewers and growing competition in the film industry, independent films started to attract interest.

In recent years, there has been a noticeable change in the cultural scene of China, marked by an increasing recognition of independent and niche films. Documentary and reality-themed productions are becoming increasingly popular, thanks to platforms such as Aiqiyi, Youku, and Bilibili (Xiaying & Hui, 2023). The current cultural revival offers filmmakers, such as Jia Zhangke, a chance to reach a broader audience. This is due to societal changes that promote cultural self-assurance and the strengthening of cultural influence, which in turn encourage more diverse and innovative approaches to filmmaking (Jihua & Ocón, 2023; Zhang & Liu, 2018).

Jia Zhangke's films provide insightful critiques of contemporary society, depicting marginalised characters who confront the difficulties posed by modernization and urbanisation in an ever-changing cultural context. Jia Zhangke's films, such as "A Touch of Sin" and "Ash is Purest White," go beyond his previous works by employing meticulous storytelling and astute social commentary to capture the complexities of contemporary Chinese life (Frey, 2016; Nikdel, 2017). Jia Zhangke's films demonstrate his growth as a filmmaker and his ability to resonate with the changing sensibilities of the audience through their nuanced exploration of social realities. Jia Zhangke's films effectively capture the contemporary spirit of China by blending personal narratives with broader societal concerns. This approach appeals to a wide audience and contributes to the ongoing discourse on cultural identity and social transformation.

The revised introduction highlights the historical importance of Jia Zhangke's films in the context of Chinese cinema and societal changes. Our research focuses on

the historical dimensions to attract readers interested in exploring historical narratives and cultural developments.

Table 1: Jia Zhangke's honors.

Time/Year	Honor
2004	Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of the French Republic
2007	Davos Economic Forum "Young Global Leaders"
2008	"Outstanding Artistic Achievement Award" at the Deauville Film Festival.
	Artistic Achievement Award, Deauville Film Festival
2009	The Guardian's "50 People Who Could Save the Planet."
	Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres de la République française (officer class)
2010	Best Director of the Decade for the New Century, Toronto Film Festival
	Golden Leopard Award of Honor, Nogaró International Film Festival, Switzerland
2014	Prince Claus Laureate of the Netherlands
	Armenian Golden Apricot International Film Festival "Paradenov Prize"
	"Golden Lake Award", Italian Neorealism Film Festival
2015	Lifetime Achievement Award, São Paulo International Film Festival
	"Top 100 Global Thinkers", Foreign Policy, USA.
2016	Pusan International Film Festival "Ten Best Asian Directors of All Time".
	Golden Horse Award for Lifetime Achievement, Directors' Fortnight, Cannes International Film Festival
2016	"Outstanding Artistic Achievement Award", 18th Mumbai International Film Festival
	"Outstanding Artistic Achievement Award" at the 38th Cairo International Film Festival

Overview of "New Generation Director" films

A number of talented new-generation directors have emerged in the contemporary era, such as Zhang Yuan, Jiang Wen, Jia Zhangke, Guan Hu, and others. Their innovative works and compelling characterizations have received widespread acclaim and adoration from audiences. Assessing the works of these directors is challenging due to their diverse and unique styles ([Gardner, 2021](#)).

Jia Zhangke is a prominent figure among the new generation of directors, known for his exceptional filmmaking techniques and expressive prowess ([Priest, 2015](#)). Jia Zhangke, originally from Fenyang, Shanxi, a typical city in northern China, began his career in cinema in 1993 while attending the Department of Literature at the Beijing Film Academy. He co-founded the "Youth Film Experiment Group" with his classmates, focusing on innovative literary approaches in filmmaking. Jia Zhangke has developed a unique filmmaking style by blending his bold and uninhibited northern character with a keen observational perspective. He has created numerous acclaimed works, including "The Pickpocket" and "Platform."

Jia Zhangke, along with Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Ming, and Lou Ye, is considered a prominent figure among China's new generation of filmmakers. The works of this filmmaker have received both domestic and international recognition, with multiple awards at renowned foreign film festivals (Xichen Sun, 2022). Notable works in his filmography include "The Pickpocket," "Platform," "Plaisirs inconnus," "The World," and "Still Life." These films provide insightful reflections on the challenging circumstances faced by marginalised populations in China, serving as microcosms of society and national history.

Jia Zhangke's films are characterised by subtle yet profound observations of life, reflecting his deep empathy and respect for the human condition. This imbues his works with a rare authenticity and emotional depth. Through his films, the director provides a glimpse into the living conditions of marginalised communities and portrays the spiritual essence of the Chinese people. Jia Zhangke's films are valuable records of society and national history, capturing life with great sensitivity and insight.



Figure 1: Screenshots from the movie "Xiaoshan Going Home".

In 1996, Jia Zhangke made his directorial debut with the film "Xiaoshan Going Home," which is a 50-minute exploration of the journey of Wang Xiaoshan, a migrant worker. The narrative depicts Wang Xiaoshan's journey through the streets of Beijing, culminating in his solitude and disillusionment in front of a barber's stall, where he

metaphorically severs his long hair. This action can be seen as both a preparation for his eventual return home and an acceptance of the challenging aspects of city life. Jia Zhangke's film offers a poignant portrayal of the challenges faced by contemporary society, demonstrating his dedication to depicting authentic social realities (Zhou, 2020).

Jia Zhangke's film "Xiaoshan Going Home" skillfully examines human nature and prompts viewers to confront uncomfortable societal truths. Zhou (2020) highlights the significance of capturing societal changes through the small details of daily life in his filmmaking approach, which strongly connects with local communities. Jia Zhangke's films prompt viewers to reflect on the intricacies of life, highlighting the importance of both unadorned truth and empathetic comprehension. The enduring appeal and significance of Jia Zhangke's cinematic oeuvre lies in its thematic depth and humanistic approach, which emphasise the unique power of cinema to foster empathy and provoke reflection.



Figure 2: Zhang Yang Movie Works.

The emergence of the latest wave of directors often leans towards appealing to the general public with their artistic ideas, leading to films that bear resemblance to popular mainstream films. In fact, there are clear indications of imitation in their work (Yang, 2018). However, several emerging directors have established their distinct market perspectives right from the start, including Zhang Yang, Liu Bingjian, and others. The movies they create are brimming with creative elements that showcase their artistic vision. These films embody traditional Chinese ideals of appreciation, as seen in the examples shown in Figure 2, including 'Spicy Love Soup', 'Shower', and 'Sunflowers'. These films garnered great acclaim from audiences upon their release. For instance, the films "Spicy Love Soup", "Shower", and "Sunflowers", depicted in

Figure 2, garnered positive feedback from the audience upon their release. Regarding other emerging directors, they have gradually embraced exceptional artistic qualities from their limited perspectives and have begun to actively pursue a wider creative platform. While still preserving and building upon their original creative abilities, they have started to adapt to the market that resonates with the majority of the audience. As a result, they have produced more artworks that are highly acclaimed by both the audience and the market (Spence, 2017).



Figure 3: Figure Guan Hu's Movie Works.

The new generation of directors, such as Guan Hu and Jia Zhangke, have experienced notable creative growth in response to market dynamics (Ottman, 2017). Guan Hu's early works, like "Dirt" and "Violoncello of the Street," initially displayed unique personal traits but encountered difficulties in achieving broad recognition (Karakas et al., 2015). However, as time went on, Guan Hu shifted his focus towards more mainstream elements in his filmmaking, leading to the creation of well-received works such as "Green Tea" and "Little Red Flowers."

Similarly, Jia Zhangke has undergone a profound evolution in his career, constantly honing his cinematic style and creative perspective (Amin & Thrift, 2017). By staying true to his unique vision and artistic principles, Jia Zhangke has successfully connected with a wider range of viewers through the refreshing nature of his more recent works.

The new generation of directors, represented by figures like Jia Zhangke, convey their distinct artistic perspectives and values through their works. As society and art continue to progress, these directors aim to go beyond specific tastes and connect with broader societal trends. By doing so, they play a significant role in the vibrant growth of China's film and art industry, bringing forth a fresh era of originality and ingenuity.

Overview of the Historical Development of Chinese Geoculture

The concept of "geoculture" has developed from Western human geography (human geography) and its branch cultural geography and has undergone various processes such as the accumulation of geographical and cultural knowledge, the formation and differentiation of disciplines, the evolution of theories, and the innovation of methods. Interestingly, ancient Chinese books contain numerous discussions on the intricate connection between humans and land. However, there is a noticeable absence of comprehensive works on the subject of human geography. Throughout history, scholars from ancient Greece and Rome have extensively written about human geography phenomena in different regions. However, during the dark Middle Ages in Europe, the progress of human geography faced significant obstacles and stagnation. Since the early 19th century, experts in this field have emerged in the modern West, gradually developing disciplinary concepts like "Anthropology" and "Cultural Geography". Throughout this period, a multitude of schools of thought arose, including the French School, the American Berkeley School, and the Swedish School. These schools gave rise to various disciplines and formed a cohesive system, encompassing concepts such as environmental determinism, human land relationship theory, and ecological regulation theory, etc.

Chinese scholars have developed concepts like "geoculture" and "regional culture" that bear resemblance to the field of cultural geography. The incorporation of geoculture in literary and artistic creation has been a longstanding and inherent practice. However, it has not garnered significant attention beyond the realm of specialised research in related fields. It wasn't until the late 1990s to the new century that the country started integrating research on geoculture into the development of an advanced socialist culture (Shao, Abdul Rahman, Hj Alli, Raja, & Ahmad Effendi, 2023). The development status of local geoculture has become a benchmark for evaluating the level of economic and social development in the region, leading to a nationwide trend in geoculture research.

The development of culture historically progresses from material culture to

deeper spiritual and cultural forms. With the emergence of cultural geography in the Western world, research also began to concentrate on the field of material culture. The expansion of the study of intangible culture, encompassing language, religious culture, customs, and traditions, began in the 1940s. The study of geoculture in China commenced relatively late (Shao, Abdul Rahman, Hj Alli, Raja, & Ahmad Effendi, 2023). However, the establishment of the "Wu Yue Culture Research Association" in the 1930s marked the earliest proposal of geoculture. However, during this period, Chinese society experienced significant turmoil, which hindered in-depth research on the topic. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the focus was on restoring and developing production, with priority given to economic construction. Cultural construction was neglected, and geopolitical culture was not given much attention. The long-term neglect of geoculture has resulted in insufficient understanding and recognition, weak awareness of its protection and utilisation, a lack of professional teams, and concerning prospects (Han & Zhang, 2023). As productivity has increased, transportation has improved significantly, leading to faster population mobility. Rapid advancements in information methods have also made regional communication easier than ever before. The outcome is a decrease in geopolitical diversity, leading to greater similarity among different cultures, and the potential for certain geopolitical cultures to vanish entirely.

In contemporary times, the rapid growth of the economy and society, along with the influence of globalisation, has led to a significant loss of traditional ethnic culture. There is a growing recognition that preserving ethnic characteristics and culture is essential for maintaining a distinct identity in the global context (Han & Zhang, 2023). The development and research of geoculture contribute to the preservation and continuation of China's traditional culture. Chinese culture consists of multiple distinct geopolitical cultures that directly reflect its diversity.

The geocultural expressions in different regions of China, including literature, film and television, music, and dance, have always been abundant and diverse. China's integration of geocultural research into the development of advanced socialist culture enhances the creative motivation of literary and artistic creators. Their aim is

to examine traditional Chinese geoculture from multiple perspectives and delve into lesser-known geocultural materials, thereby contributing to the preservation and promotion of this rich cultural heritage. However, it is important to be cautious of certain widespread misconceptions that aim to achieve economic gains through cultural development, and may even have ulterior motives. There have been numerous instances of ancient buildings being demolished, cultural relics being destroyed, tourist attractions being abandoned, and different regions vying for historical figures, including both heroes and villains. The continuation of this trend may lead to the destruction of authentic culture and the proliferation of regressive and corrupt ideologies that contradict global advancements.

The Connection Between Geo-Culture and Jia Zhangke's Movie

Jia Zhangke's films are characterised by his admiration for the secular aspects of life and his incorporation of personal experiences within historical settings. Jia Zhangke employs film as a means of preserving memories and directs his attention towards the often-neglected aspects of ordinary life, infusing them with a profound sense of importance. The author's childhood experiences in Shanxi had a significant impact on his cinematic vision, despite his departure from his rural roots in his youth (WANG, 2019). Jia Zhangke's preference for certain locations, such as Shanxi, the Yangtze River region, and Guangdong, is apparent in his extensive filmography, as many of his films take place in these favoured settings.

Moreover, Jia Zhangke's depiction of deteriorating environments, lively crowds, and changing urban landscapes offers a nuanced examination of the relationship between physical spaces and human experiences. "Xiaoshan Going Home" portrays the chaotic and disorderly living environment of Xiaoshan as a reflection of the harsh realities of contemporary urban life. Similarly, "The Pickpocket" and "Plaisirs inconnus" use weathered buildings and dilapidated surroundings as symbolic backdrops to depict the characters' existential struggles. Jia Zhangke often explores the themes of "demolition and reconstruction" in his films, portraying the

subtle yet significant spatial transformations that reflect the passage of time.

For instance, the films "The Pickpocket" and "Still Life" depict the tension between progress and loss in rapidly changing urban landscapes through scenes of commercial pharmacies and guesthouses facing demolition. Jia Zhangke explores the theme of urbanisation and its effects on individuals in "The World" and "24 City" by contrasting the destruction of old structures with the rise of modern high-rise buildings. Jia Zhangke's evocative portrayals of changing geographical spaces prompt audiences to reflect on the complexities of societal change and the enduring resilience of the human spirit in the face of urban upheaval.



Figure 4: The Wenfeng Pagoda in Mountains May Department.

According to British cultural geographer Mike Krone, geographical landscapes are shaped by social ideology and, in turn, serve to uphold and reinforce that ideology. Examining geographical landscapes can help to explain human value concepts. The coal gangue found in the "Mountains May Department" serves as a distinctive symbol of Shanxi coal mines and plays a crucial role in the survival of Liang Jianjun and his fellow soldiers. The chimney in "Plaisirs Inconnus" serves as a significant symbol of both the Datong Factory and the emotional emptiness experienced by young individuals. The ancient ruins of Wenfeng Pagoda in "Mountains May Department," as depicted in [Figure 4](#), serve as a historical gift and a testament to Zhao Tao's enduring tenderness throughout the passage of time. The presentation of natural symbols in geographic spaces can effectively guide the audience towards specific contexts. Despite their rough and bleak appearance, they possess sharpness and power.

Jia Zhangke's films emphasise the importance of geographical spaces as a means of vividly depicting the complexities of Chinese society. Jia Zhangke utilises long shots in his photography to depict the expansive social landscapes that characterise modern China. The film "Xiaoshan Going Home" utilises a shaky camera technique to capture various urban settings, including busy streets, crowded marketplaces, and lively Spring Festival scenes. This approach provides viewers with a vivid portrayal of the vibrant aspects of daily life. Moreover, in addition to portraying societal dynamics, these crowded spaces in Chinese cinema also function as a distinct cultural landscape. The presence of spectators in these spaces contributes additional layers of meaning to the narrative.

For example, in "Xiaoshan Going Home," Wang Xingdong's assault and in "The Pickpocket," the encounter between the pickpocket and law enforcement are marked by the presence of unresponsive bystanders. Their silent observation highlights the prevalent indifference or curiosity ingrained in Chinese society. In both "Still Life" and "A Touch of Sin," characters are observed by crowds of spectators, who react with a range of emotions from indifference to restlessness. These reactions mirror the diverse responses to societal turmoil and ethical uncertainty. In "Ash is Pure White," the procession of prisoners through town symbolises the voyeuristic tendencies of human nature, as it attracts a curious crowd.

Moreover, the spectators in Jia Zhangke's films enhance the social backdrop of small-town life and contribute to the overall atmosphere, creating a realistic and dynamic experience. Jia Zhangke's nuanced portrayals of geographical spaces and their inhabitants prompt audiences to reflect on the complex relationship between societal norms, individual agency, and the dynamic urban landscape of modern China.



Wao Qiaoqiao's carnival in the disco in the movie "Plaisirs Inconnus"



The passionate dance in "Ash is Pure White"

Figure 5: The passionate dance in Plaisirs Inconnus and Ash is Pure White.

Space has always played a role in the imagination of history. Since the initiation of the reform and opening up policy in 1978, the previously restricted literary and artistic field has experienced a surge in popular culture. Space venues, including performances and discos, have emerged as the preferred settings for Jia Zhangke's films. The geography provides a pre-existing context, while the subjective interpretation of history influences actions and shapes the narrative. Cui Mingliang and his team transitioned from rural cultural work teams to becoming staff members of the Shenzhen Thunderbolt Troupe, where they were involved in outdoor music and dance performances. [Figure 5](#) illustrates the similarities between Zhao Qiaoqiao's carnival in the disco in the movie "Plaisirs Inconnus" and the passionate dance in "Ash is Pure White". The enclosed setting and fervent music reflect the agitated audience and unsettled emotions. The county town's vibrant cultural atmosphere is enhanced by the lively and extraordinary crowd, where "seeing" and "being seen" take on additional significance.

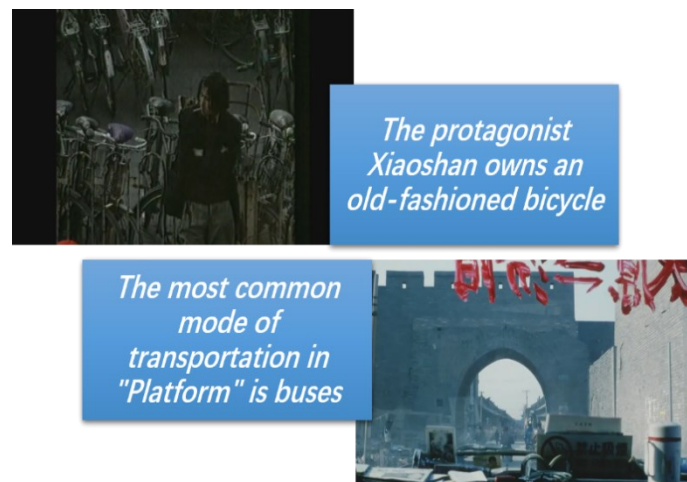


Figure 6: Transportation for Xiaoshan Going Home and Platform.

Jia Zhangke's films explore the impact of various modes of transportation, such as bicycles, electric vehicles, cars, buses, trains, high-speed trains, cruise ships, and aeroplanes, on geographical and social distances. The frequent use of transport is integral to people's lives. As transport continues to upgrade and replace, it unconsciously reflects the changes in the development of society. The film "Xiaoshan Going Home" features the protagonist Xiaoshan who owns a vintage bicycle, which serves as the mode of transportation for him and Bian E during their dates ([Figure 6](#)).

The evident pleasure experienced during the ride serves as an implicit testament to their affection, while Bian E's solitary return on the bike signifies the conclusion of their relationship. Buses are the primary mode of transportation in "Platform". The art troupe members use buses to travel to various areas within Shanxi province, including Wucheng, Fenyang, Jiaxian, and Taiyuan. The film "The World" depicts a group of individuals from Shanxi who migrate to Beijing in search of employment opportunities. The death of the second girl signifies her desire to embark on a train journey towards a broader world, yet she remains subject to the control of destiny.



Figure 7: Transportation in the movie "Mountains May Department".

The evolution of transport reflects historical progress and conveys significant humanistic symbolism. Figure 7 illustrates the introduction of various types of vehicles, such as electric vehicles, cars, trains, and aeroplanes, in the movie "Mountains May Department". The time periods of 1999, 2014, and 2025, spanning over 30 years, exhibit the economic development and temporal changes through the evolution of vehicles. Electric cars serve as a mode of transportation for Shen Tao within urban areas, while also representing the concept of personal liberty. Small cars symbolise urban progress and Zhang Jinsheng's affection for the Love Chip. Trains serve as a convenient means of transportation that connect various regions, while also providing Shen Tao with a platform to express maternal love. Aeroplanes serve as a means of global transportation and also symbolise the emotional distance between Shen Tao and his son. The evolution of transport serves as a testament to the

progression of time and bears witness to historical events. The transformation of transportation has led to a significant change in distance. Is this change characterised by a greater or lesser proximity? This statement inevitably leads to profound reflection.

The Mutual Influence of Geoculture and Social Changes in China

Jia Zhangke started his film career in the 1990s, a period of comprehensive reform and opening up in China. The material needs of individuals continued to grow, while their spiritual lives remained limited. China is currently experiencing significant socio-economic transformation, characterised by prominent social contradictions and a widening wealth gap. Jia Zhangke adeptly captured and documented these contradictions and issues through his films, offering the audience a contemplative environment. Hence, Jia Zhangke's film style is influenced by the transitional period of Chinese society, where the main focus of his films is the Chinese society itself. An investigation into Jia Zhangke's film style should incorporate a research perspective on China's transitional society.

The process of societal transformation is often accompanied by the challenges of social reform, and China is no different in this regard. China has experienced significant changes in social structure and economic system during its period of social transformation. These changes have also led to notable fluctuations in people's social values and ideological concepts. The main aspects of this can be seen in the following two areas: Firstly, the diversification of value standards. Value standards are fundamental criteria used by individuals to assess and select the worth of something, thereby directly influencing their actions.

During the 1990s, Chinese society experienced significant transformations, leading to continuous changes in social, interpersonal, and family relationships. The fate, values, and psychological states of individuals undergo turbulence and change during periods of social transformation. The majority of individuals have experienced the challenge of finding their purpose amidst significant societal transformations. Jia Zhangke keenly experienced the turbulence and changes in Chinese society during

this transitional period. Hence, he endeavoured to document these experiences on film, harnessing the potential of the medium to address the emotional shortcomings prevalent in contemporary society.



Figure 8: The stills reflecting social changes in Jia Zhangke's films.

The term "platform" refers to the privatisation and contracting of cultural and industrial troupes, as well as the resulting loss and transformation of traditional values. "A Touch of Sin" is a film that incorporates actual news events from a society undergoing change. It portrays how individuals experience a sense of disconnection from their values and a decline in their emotional well-being within the larger social framework. "24 CITY" examines the process of state-owned enterprises restructuring and the resulting wave of layoffs during social transformation, using individualised expression. "Still Life" explores the plight of Three Gorges migrants affected by the Three Gorges Project. Jia Zhangke explores his concerns and thoughts about traditional Chinese culture during the transition period in his film Mountains May Depart, as depicted in Figure 8. Jia Zhangke's films centre on Chinese society during the transition period, exploring the contradictions and problems that arise during this period of social development. He specifically focuses on vulnerable groups, including migrant workers, laid-off workers, and engineering migrants, using film as a medium to express his distinctive humanistic concern.

Historical Reflections in Jia Zhangke's Movies

Jia Zhangke's films are notable in contemporary times due to their skillful reconstruction of history and relevance to current social needs. The artwork "Still Life"

documents the effects of the Three Gorges Project on local cities and immigrant communities. Jia Zhangke deliberately selected the Three Gorges Project and the Three Gorges migrants as the focal point of his film, indicating his personal reflections. The Three Gorges Project is a large-scale national water conservancy construction project that necessitated the relocation of over 1.4 million local residents. During that period, the primary focus of social attention was on the Three Gorges Project, with little mention of the Three Gorges immigrant group. Jia Zhangke astutely captured this dynamic. Simultaneously with the progress of the Three Gorges Project, Jia Zhangke directed his camera towards these immigrants, employing visual elements to express his emotional empathy towards the immigrants affected by the Three Gorges Project.



Figure 9: Stills from A Touch of Sin.

"A Touch of sin" portrays the violent events that have occurred in society in recent years, using a combination of traditional opera elements to tell the story. This reflects the current state of society and its development. As depicted in [Figure 9](#). Three opera stories are intertwined with modern tales in the film, serving the purpose of drawing inspiration from the past to satirise the present. This clever fusion not only enhances the depth of the characters but also evokes a stronger emotional connection from the audience.

In the initial segment of the film, Hu Hai, driven by desperation, resorts to wielding a shotgun as a means to resolve his conflicts through violent means. The performance of "Lin Chong's Night Running" on the village stage serves as a fitting parallel to the contemporary narrative of the movie. Lin Chong's recitation: "I, Lin

Chong, in a moment of anger, drew my sword and killed Gao Ziang's treacherous spy and two thieves", also blends the classic character image of Lin Chong with Hu Hai. Subsequently, Hu Hai emerged from his residence armed with a gun, accompanied by the background music from the film "Barium Judge". This musical accompaniment heightened the intensity of Hu Hai's situation and foreshadowed the forthcoming conclusion of the narrative. In the final scene of "A Touch of Sin," the opera performance of "Su San Rising" is featured. Xiao Yu is among the audience, observing the opera. On stage, the magistrate repeatedly asks, "Su San, do you know your crime?" This interrogation serves not only as a questioning of Su San, but also as a form of judgement towards Xiao Yu. Jia Zhangke skillfully reconstructs historical events in the film, effectively intertwining them with the contemporary narrative and conveying societal perspectives on social issues.

Jia Zhangke's films of different periods often centre around ordinary people, small characters, and marginalised groups, reflecting his distinct humanistic concern. In his film "The Pickpocket," Jia Zhangke explores the lives of marginalised individuals, specifically focusing on the character of Xiaowu, a pickpocket. Zhangke's portrayal of Xiaowu challenges the conventional image of thieves in mainstream cinema and challenges the audience's preconceived stereotypes. From the mainstream societal standpoint, Xiaowu is considered a typical marginalised individual who has been excluded from the conventional trajectory of society. Jia Zhangke employs the thief as the protagonist in the film not to perpetuate stereotypes, but rather to examine the inherent goodness of the character's humanity by depicting his predicament. This approach aims to challenge the audience's preconceived notions of this particular group and reflects Jia Zhangke's distinctive humanistic concern for marginalised segments of society.

Conclusion

This paper offers a thorough examination of the emerging group of Chinese film directors, specifically focusing on Jia Zhangke's works. The aim is to shed light on the complex relationship between geography, culture, social transformation, and

historical representation portrayed in his films. This analysis has provided valuable insights into the unique contributions of these directors to Chinese society, culture, and history. Future research could compare Chinese filmmaking with international cinema to identify the unique characteristics of Chinese films in a global context. Furthermore, studying the influence of geo-cultural factors on the creative process of Chinese filmmakers, analysing the portrayal of subaltern narratives in cinema, and conducting longitudinal studies on filmmaking trends would enhance our comprehension of the changing landscape of Chinese cinema.

Moreover, future research could assess audience reception and cultural impact of Chinese films, especially those addressing socio-political issues and historical reflections. Researchers can assess the impact of cinematic narratives on public discourse and cultural memory by analysing audience responses, critical reception, and box office performance. The exploration of these avenues of inquiry has the potential to enhance our understanding of the complex relationship between cinema, society, and culture in modern China. This can provide valuable insights for future research and academic discussions.

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