HISTORICAL REFLECTION IN JIA ZHANGKE'S FILMS: THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GEOCULTURE AND SOCIAL CHANGE IN CHINA

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Abstract
Since the 1990s, Jia Zhangke's films have comprehensively reflected the social and political changes in China's reform and opening-up process. His works focus on the transformation of public images, social systems and institutions, and delve into the far-reaching impact of these changes on individual lives. From a macro and meso perspective, this article takes Jia Zhangke's films as an example, exploring the social progress in the process of modernisation as well as the adaptation and dislocation of the individual between the old and the new way of life in Jia Zhangke's film narratives. The "Image of the County" series is particularly prominent, outlining the grand narrative of national transformation through the daily lives of ordinary people. Jia Zhangke skillfully switches between documentary and fictional narratives, placing real individuals in key historical scenes, demonstrating the resilience and complexity of the Chinese people in the midst of the dramatic changes of the times, and leaving a profound cultural image of a rapidly changing society.

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

1. INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s and 1990s, China underwent profound social and cultural changes, which gave rise to two important literary movements, "scar literature" and "root literature" (Guo, 2007; Liang, 2016)."Scars literature" focuses on reflecting on historical trauma, especially the suffering caused by political movements and the Cultural Revolution in the first half of the 20th century; while "roots literature" is dedicated to exploring personal and national identity, and demonstrating the identity and reconstruction of identity through reconnecting with cultural heritage and historical roots. identity and reconstruction by reconnecting with cultural heritage and historical roots. Together, these two literary genres have laid an important

foundation for the development of Chinese literature, providing complementary perspectives for the discussion of social history and identity, and profoundly influencing the development of Chinese cinema. This period saw the emergence of classic films such as Yellow Earth and Red Sorghum, which featured social upheaval and a deep sense of history, demonstrating the complexity of Chinese culture and society. In addition, publications such as World Cinema and Art of Cinema revived interest in realist cinema through the translation and dissemination of important articles such as "A Review of Italian Neorealism after Twenty Years" and "The Inheritance of Italian Neorealism" (Hu & Chen, 2021; Sun, 2022a). This theoretical dissemination laid the ideological foundation for the rise of the fifth and sixth generations of Chinese filmmakers, who continued and innovated the realist tradition in their work. Fifth-generation directors, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, specialise in constructing grand narratives and exploring collective history and cultural memory against the backdrop of China's countryside; sixth-generation directors, such as Jia Zhangke, Ning Hao and Lu Chuan, aim their lenses at the urban marginalised, showing the individual struggles of rapid socio-economic transformations through delicate narratives (Kyong-McClain, Meeuf, & Chang, 2022; Lo, 2020). Although these directors display novelty in their narrative approach and film style, their initial works struggled to gain market recognition due to their deviation from the conventions of mainstream cinema. For example, Jia Zhangke's early works such as The Good Person of the Three Gorges were mainly disseminated through underground screening channels (Yang, 2018a). However, with the diversification of audience tastes and the intensification of competition in the film market, independent films have gradually gained more attention and recognition. In recent years, the popularity of documentary and realist films has risen significantly in China with the rise of streaming platforms such as Aqiyi, Youku, and BiliBili (Xiaying & Hui, 2023). This trend has provided wider distribution channels for independent directors and contributed to the development of a film culture centred on diversity and experimental expression (Jihua & Ocyn, 2024; Zhang & Liu, 2018). In this context, Jia Zhangke has continued to deepen his critical examination of contemporary Chinese society through works such as Heavenly Doomed and The Old Man of the Mountain and River. However, they share a concern for the survival of the marginalised person under the pressure of modernization and urbanization (Frey, 2016; Nikdel, 2017), and are characterized by delicate narratives and social observations (Nikdel, 2017).

Table 1: Table Table 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"
	"Outstanding Artistic Achievement Award at the Deauville Film Festival.W
2008	Artistic Achievement Award, Deauville Film Festival"
	"The Guardian's 50 People Who Could Save the Planet."
2009	"Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres de la Rйpublique franзaise (officer class)"
	"Best Director of the Decade for the New Century, Toronto Film Festival"
2010	"Golden Leopard Award of Honor, Nogaro International Film Festival, Switzerland
	Prince Claus Laureate of the Netherlands."
	"Armenian Golden Apricot International Film Festival Paradenov Prize"
	"Golden Lake Award, Italian Neorealism Film Festival"
2014	"Lifetime Achievement Award, Sro Paulo International Film Festival"
	"Top 100 Global Thinkers", Foreign Policy, USA.
	"Pusan International Film Festival "Ten Best Asian Directors of All Time".
2015	"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"

Jia Zhangke's films interweave personal narratives with social issues, capturing the complexity and tension of social transformation in modern China made possible by ณะคคมาเพส 暮 คค เขต Asia Cinema. His works not only record the cultural spirit of the contemporary era in China but also furthering thinking about cultural identity and social change. Lastly, Jia Zhangke's films are of crucial importance in helping to understand Chinese film in history and to identify the dynamics of social transformation. As a reflection of the interaction of the individual society and times changing, his works hold values for cultural and historical research on related fields.

1.1. Overview of "New Generation Director" films

In recent years, a fresh wave of talented filmmakers has emerged in Chinese cinema, including directors such as "Zhang Yuan, Jiang Wen, Jia Zhangke, and Guan Hu." These directors have garnered both critical acclaim and popular attention for their innovative storytelling techniques and the complexity of their characters. However, evaluating their works presents challenges due to the distinctiveness and diversity of their cinematic styles (Gardner, 2021). Among this new generation of filmmakers, Jia Zhangke stands out as a key figure, renowned for his exceptional technical skill and emotional depth (Priest, 2015). Jia, hailed from Fenyang in northern China, started out as a filmmaker in 1993 while studying at the Beijing Film Academy's Department of Literature. He also co-founded, with his peers, the "Youth Film Experiment Group," an experiment in the field of experimental filmmaking. As a result of his unique northern view and sharp observational style, Jia's films have been celebrated for their authenticity, especially in films like The Pickpocket and Platform.

Jia Zhangke has emerged, along with contemporaries like Zhang Yuan, Wang Xiaoshuai, Zhang Ming and Lou Ye, as a central figure in China's new wave of filmmakers. Domestic audiences have connected with his films and his films have won prestigious film festival awards while earning international recognition (Sun, 2022b). The Pickpocket, Platform, Unknown Pleasures, The World and Still Life are poignant representations of the country's social and historical transformations and a profound reflection of marginalized communities' lives in China. However, his films revolve around ordinary life in a subdued and powerful way, occasionally accompanied with empathy and admiration for humanity. More than that, through his lens he shows us the struggles of the overlooked, the under represented; but also the threaded strength and resiliency of the Chinese people. In this way, Jia Zhangke's films offer invaluable insights into both the personal and collective history of China, revealing life with remarkable sensitivity and depth.

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

Jia Zhangke made his directorial debut in 1996 with *Xiaoshan Going Home*, a 50-minute film that portrays the journey of a migrant worker named Wang Xiaoshan. It is the story of Wang, as he wanders Beijing streets, until he becomes alone and dejected in opposite of a barber's stall, where he becomes convinced to cut his long hair. This act provides a solid metaphor for his getting in shape to move back home, but also for his gradual acquiescence to the severe truths of life in the city. In this early work, Jia Zhangke presents a heartfelt and close view of the troubles of contemporary society (Zhou, 2020). Sharp observational style marks out Jia's timing and tendency for bristling discomfort — in Xiaoshan Going Home he has viewers look uncomfortably at home in modern society. Zhou (2020) points out that Jia's philosophy of filmmaking lies in the representation of the changes of society through the small, often forgotten little moments of everyday life, which touch the membership hearts of the oppressed. Jia uses his films to ask the audience to reflect upon the nature of existence, be it on the grounds of its unflinching realism or empathy. Jia Zhangke's work is marked by this thematic richness and a humanistic approach that enhances its lasting impact and the unique power of cinema to induce both compassion and critical thought.

Figure 2: Figure Zhang Yang Movie Works.

The emergence of the new generation of directors has often led to films that cater to mainstream artistic trends, causing their content and style to closely resemble popular cinema, with some films showing clear signs of imitation (Yang, 2018b). However, directors like Zhang Yang and Liu Bingjian stand out for their distinct market perspectives from the outset. Their films reflect creative characteristics that align with their artistic vision while resonating with traditional Chinese cultural values (Pugsley, 2016). Movies such as *Spicy Love Soup*, *Shower*, and *Sunflowers* (shown in Figure 2) were well-received by audiences upon their release, highlighting the success of this approach.

Figure 3: "Guan Hu's Movie Works".

On the other hand, many other new-generation directors have gradually expanded their artistic horizons, drawing inspiration from a broader range of influences. While retaining the unique qualities that initially defined their work, these filmmakers have sought to appeal to a wider audience. By adapting their style to fit market demands, they have created works that are not only well-regarded by the public but also commercially successful (Spence, 2017). Market dynamics have also influenced the cultural change in the new generation of directors, including leading directors such as Guan Hu and Jia Zhangke (Ottman, 2017). However, Guan Hu's early pieces such as Dirt and Violoncello of the Street had a distinct personal style, but did not grab wide recognition in the beginning (Karakas, Manisaligil, & Sarigollu, 2015). But as the years passed Guan also learned to integrate some more modernist notions into his works, and the films Green Tea and Little Red Flowers, with their more average genre, were comparatively successful. It didn't only increase his audience but showed his ability to combine artistic integrity with commercial appeal.

In similarly way, Jia Zhangke has transformed a lot, while his artistic perspective was changing regularly and maintain his personal vision (Amin & Thrift, 2017). However, Jia has put some of his individuality in place, yet changed his style to accommodate a wider audience, and these later films have regained some of their freshness. Directors of the new generation, exemplified by figures like "Jia Zhangke," continue to express their different artistic perceptions and standards through their work. As both society and art evolve, these filmmakers aim to bridge the gap between niche sensibilities and mainstream trends, contributing to the dynamic growth of China's film industry. Their work signals a new era of creativity and innovation, pushing the boundaries of both artistic expression and commercial success.

2. THE EVOLUTION OF GEOCULTURE IN CHINA: A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The development of the concept "geoculture" has gone through several stages, from the accumulation of geographical and cultural knowledge, the formation of academic disciplines, the creation of theories and the invention of research methods in Western human geography, the starting point of which is cultural geography. Although ancient Chinese texts contain many discussions about the relationship between humans and land, no systematic works on human geography were produced. In contrast, scholars from ancient Greece and Rome discussed human geography phenomena across different regions, but with the onset of the Dark Ages in Europe, the development of human geography stagnated. It was not until the early 19th century that specialized scholars emerged in the modern West, leading to the formation of disciplines like "Anthropology" and "Cultural Geography." During this period, various schools of thought, such as the French School, the American Berkeley School, and the Swedish School, emerged, and theories like environmental determinism and human-land relationship theory began to develop. In China, scholars introduced concepts such as "geoculture" and "regional culture," which are closely related to cultural geography. The integration of geoculture into literary and artistic creation has always been a natural process, but it did not gain widespread attention until the late 1990s and early 2000s, when research on geoculture became a key part of the construction of advanced socialist culture. The state even began using the development of local geocultures as a metric for evaluating economic and social progress, which sparked a national interest in the subject (Ye, Binwei, & Starkey, 2018). Historically, cultural development naturally extends from material culture to deeper spiritual and intangible forms. In the West, cultural geography initially focused on material culture, but by the 1940s, it expanded to include intangible cultural aspects like language, religion, and customs. Although the study of geoculture in China began later, the "Wu Yue Culture Research Association" established in the 1930s is considered the earliest initiative. However, due

to the turmoil in China during that period, the research into geoculture remained limited. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country focused on economic reconstruction, with cultural development taking a backseat. Consequently, geoculture was neglected for a long time, leading to a lack of understanding, protection, and professional expertise in the field.

In recent decades, however, as productivity increased, transportation improved, population mobility accelerated, and information technologies advanced rapidly, regional communication became much more accessible. These changes have led to a reduction in cultural diversity, greater convergence among different cultures, and, in some cases, the potential loss of certain geocultures. With the accelerated development of the economy and the impact of globalization, culture has become increasingly significant in contemporary society. People have come to realize that preserving traditional ethnic characteristics and culture is crucial for maintaining a unique identity in a rapidly globalizing world. The study and development of geoculture play a vital role in safeguarding and continuing China's rich cultural heritage. Chinese culture, in fact, consists of multiple distinct geopolitical cultures, each of which reflects the country's cultural diversity.

Geocultural expressions are vividly present in the literature, film, television, music, and dance from various regions of China. The integration of geocultural research into the construction of advanced socialist culture has further inspired literary and artistic creators to explore traditional Chinese geoculture from diverse perspectives. These creators have worked to uncover lesser-known aspects of geoculture, contributing to the preservation and revitalization of these cultural traditions. However, there is a growing concern about the commercialization of culture for economic gain, sometimes with ulterior motives. We have seen numerous cases of ancient buildings being demolished, cultural relics being destroyed, tourist attractions being abandoned, and regions competing to claim historical figures or events. If these trends continue, genuine cultural heritage could be eroded, giving rise to misguided and corrupt practices that stray from international progress and values.

3. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN GEO-CULTURE AND JIA ZHANGKE'S MOVIE

Jia Zhangke's films are deeply grounded in his reverence for the everyday and his personal connection to historical landscapes. Using cinema as a means of preserving memory, he focuses on overlooked spaces in daily life, imbuing them with profound significance (Mello, 2019). His childhood in Shanxi, marked by intimate ties with his hometown and its rural communities, left an indelible impression on his cinematic perspective, even as he ventured beyond his roots in his youth (Wang, 2019). A key aspect of Jia's work is the focus on areas such as Shanxi, Yangtze River basin, and Guangdong; and he frequently chooses them as film-scape to play out his narrative. Jia Zhangke represents geography to human experience intertwining his portrayal of decaying environments, bustling crowds and changing urban landscapes. Xiao Shan Goes Home illustrates the harsh realities of living in the contemporary urban world through the chaotic living conditions of the protagonist. In Xiao Wu and Unknown Pleasures, the run down areas are symbolic locations in which the characters are struggling with the existential situations of their lives. A recurring theme in Jia's work is "demolition and reconstruction"inas which he views the quiet transformation in space associated with the social development. A good example of this is *Xiao Wu* and *The Good Person of the Three Gorges*, two films that use scenes of commercial buildings and hotels that are being demolished to demonstrate the tug of progress and loss during rapid urbanization. It is also reflected in The World and A Tale of Twenty-Four Cities, where the destruction of the old and the rise of modern skyscrapers serves as a symbol for the irreversible nature of modern urbanization

and its devastating impact on the fates of people. With his ability to depict geographical spaces in a state of upheaval, his ability to invite the audience to think about the fluidity of the social and the tenacity of the human spirit in the face of urban upheaval, Jia Zhangke draws in an audience.

Figure 4: "The Wenfeng Pagoda in Mountains May Department".

British cultural geographer Mike Krone noted that "the formation process of geographical landscapes reflects social ideology, and social ideology is preserved and consolidated through geographical landscapes." In this sense, examining geographical landscapes offers insight into human values. The coal gangue on the ground in *Mountains May Department* symbolizes the coal mines of Shanxi, representing both the harsh survival conditions of characters like Liang Jianjun and the many others who share his fate. Similarly, the chimney in *Plaisirs Inconnus* stands as a silent yet striking landmark of the Datong Factory, reflecting the desolation felt by the young generation. As shown in Figure 4, the ancient ruins of the "Wenfeng Pagoda in *Mountains May Department"* are not only a historical relic but also a testimony to Zhao Tao's stable painfulness. These natural symbols in the geographic spaces create a powerful sense of context for the audience. Though rough and bleak, they are deeply evocative and filled with emotional resonance.

In "Jia Zhangke's" films, geographic space carries deep symbolic meaning and often serves as a narrative vehicle for the complexity of Chinese society. Through his trademark realist long shots, Jia Zhangke vividly recreates the social landscape of contemporary China. For example, in Xiao Shan Goes Home, the shaky camera travels through bustling streets, crowded markets, and scenes filled with the atmosphere of the Chinese New Year, not only showing the rhythm of ordinary people's lives, but also constructing a unique cultural landscape of Chinese cinema through these details (Barker, 2019). This landscape not only reflects social dynamics, but also adds layers to the narrative due to the presence of bystanders in the frame, further reinforcing the importance of collective experience in film narratives.

In Xiao Shan Goes Home, the scene in which Wang Xingdong is attacked, as well as the bridge sequence in Xiao Wu in which he confronts law enforcement officers, are accompanied by the gaze of indifferent bystanders. The silence of the bystanders reflects a pervasive sense of detachment and curiosity in Chinese society. In The Good Person of the Three Gorges and Heaven's Doomed, the characters weave in and out of crowds, and the reactions of different individuals to social unrest and moral dilemmas-from indifference to anxiety-further emphasise the complexity of social conflicts. Similarly, in The Children of Jianghu, the prisoner's procession through the town triggers crowds of onlookers, symbolising a certain voyeuristic and onlooker attitude towards suffering in society, and this kind of observation and non-involvement in suffering has become

an important manifestation of Jia's thoughts on human nature.

The presence of these bystanders not only lends a strong sense of realism to Jia Zhangke's film, but also enriches the social fabric of small-town life. Through his delicate portrayal of geographic space and crowd relations, Jia Zhangke transforms physical space into a metaphor that maps the tension between social norms and individual actions. His films show the cultural changes and social conflicts in the process of urbanisation and modernisation in contemporary China, and outline a unique picture of social and cultural transformation through the confrontation and fusion of the individual and society.

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

The passionate dance in "Ash is Pure White"

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

History has always been about space and the imagination of history. A surge of popular culture had overtaken China's literary and artistic landscape since the reform and opening up in 1978, previously restricted. Jia Zhangke's films located performance halls and discos as venues central to them. The subjectivity of history guides the actions and drives the narrative while these geographical spaces when taken as backdrops become these existing geographical spaces. In Platform, Cui Mingliang and her team move away from being a member of a rural cultural work group and become performers of the Shenzhen Thunderbolt Troupe, which put up outdoor music and dance performances. Zhao Qiaoqiao's carnival in Plaisirs Inconnus' disco (Figure 5) shows that her carnival develops the same passionate dance that is shown in Ash Is Pure White. The enclosed space and the liveliness of the music correspond to the restless crowd, the turbulent emotions inside. Within the people bustling on the street, 'see' and 'be seen' encompass deeper meaning, as well as the unique culture of the county town is more so accentuated by the people's energy and enthusiasm.
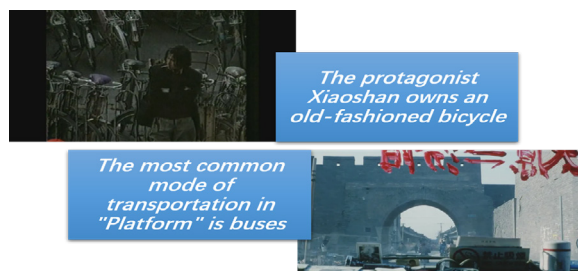

The protagonist Xiaoshan owns an old-fashioned bicycle

The most common mode of transportation in "Platform" is buses

Figure 6: Transportation for Xiaoshan Going Home and Platform.

In Jia Zhangke's films, whether it is bicycles, electric vehicles, cars and other means of transportation, or large transportation such as buses, trains, high-speed trains, cruise ships, airplanes, etc., the

constantly changing transportation brings geographical distances closer and farther and also brings people's living distances farther and farther. In the frequent use of transportation, people's lives are inseparable from transportation, and with the continuous upgrading and replacement of transportation, the changes in the development of the times are unconsciously presented. As shown in Figure 6, in the movie "Xiaoshan Going Home", the protagonist Xiaoshan owns an old-fashioned bicycle, which is also the means of transportation for him and Bian E to date. The simple joy during the ride is a tacit witness to their love, and the process of Bian E riding the bike back alone is a sign of the end of their love. The most common mode of transportation in "Platform" is buses, and members of the art troupe use buses to travel to multiple areas such as Wucheng, Fenyang, Jiaxian, and Taiyuan, but all are concentrated in the flow within Shanxi province. In the movie "The World", a group of men and women who came from Shanxi come to Beijing to work hard (Smits & Nikdel, 2019). The passing of the second girl tells us that she set off on a train that she longed for to go to a larger world, but still couldn't escape the manipulation of fate.
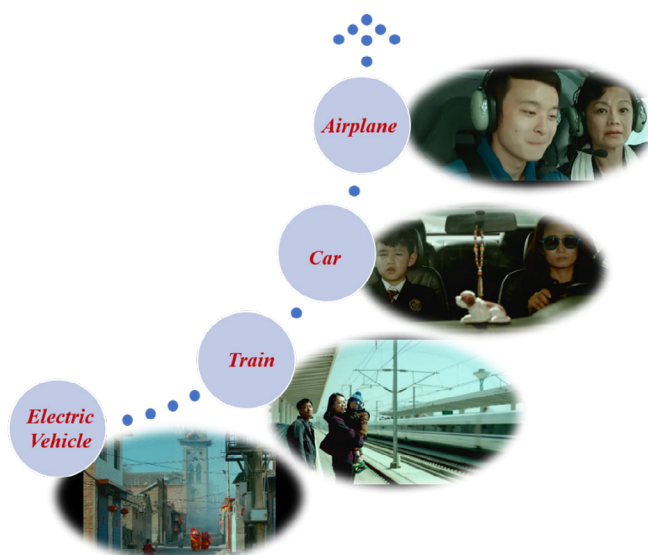

Figure 7: Conveyance in the Movie.

The transformation of transportation serves as both a testament to historical development and a carrier of profound humanistic imagery. As shown in Figure 7, in *Mountains May Department*, electric cars, trains, airplanes, and other vehicles sequentially enter the market. The three periods "1999, 2014, and 2025"spanning more than 30 years, reflect the economic development and societal shifts through the evolution of transportation. Electric cars, for example, represent Shen Tao's journey through the streets and symbolize personal freedom. Small cars, on the other hand, embody urban progress and serve as a metaphor for Zhang Jinsheng's love. Trains, as a means of connecting different regions, also provide Shen Tao a space to express maternal love. Airplanes, which connect the world, symbolize the emotional distance between Shen Tao and her son. These transportation changes mirror the transformations of the times, becoming silent witnesses to history. Interestingly, however, one might wonder—does the distance created by the transformation of transportation bring us closer or farther apart? This question invites deeper reflection.

4. THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN GEOCULTURE AND SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION IN CHINA

From the mid-1990s, Jia Zhangke has been a filmmaker in China, when the country was opening up to globalization and had gone through a comprehensive reform. At this time, when people's material needs were growing tremendously, their spiritual life was rather underdeveloped. Social contradictions were increasingly marked in such a society as it undergoes rapid socio-economic transformation, and wealth gaps grew. Jia Zhangke intelligently documented and had his audience meditate in the space between those contradictions and social issues through his films. As such, Jia's development of his filmmaking style, tied into the transition of Chinese society, with the period of change being the element of focus in his work. For the formation of his style, it would be a good thing to explore through the broader context of China's society transition (Cao, 2018). Reform is bound to be difficult but social transformation has always had that effect and China is no exception. At this time of change, both social structure and economic systems went through a series of changes which caused an up and down in people's social values and ideological beliefs. To the extent that these changes are reflected in two key aspects, changes in value standards are primarily reflected in two of them. Value standards are used as the value basis for people that might gauge what is valuable and then select (or not select) a course of action as a result. In the 1990s, Chinese society was undergoing rapid changes, during which people's social, interpersonal, and family relationships were constantly changing. "The fate of people, as well as their values and psychological states, are turbulent and changing in the process of social transformation. Almost everyone has lost and sought their place in life in this tumultuous social change." Jia Zhangke, in such a transitional period of Chinese society, deeply felt this turbulence and changes. Therefore, he attempted to record all of this through film, using the power of film to compensate for the emotional deficiencies in current society.
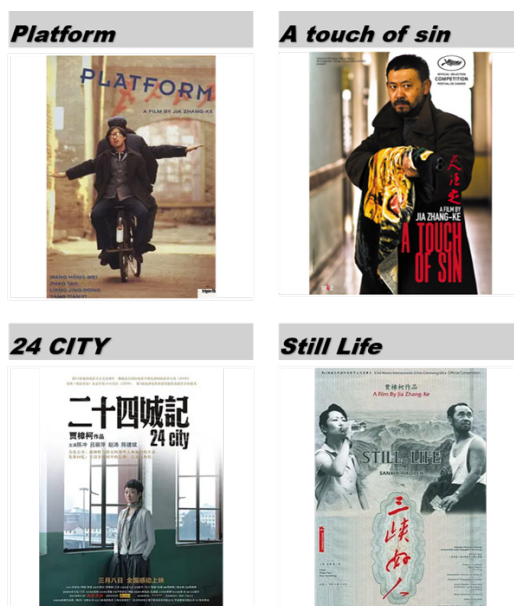

Figure 8: Stills that Capture the Social Changes Depicted in "Jia Zhangke's" Films.

Platform offers a sharp portrait of privatization and downsizing of cultural and industrial organisations and the erosion and restructuring of traditional values. A Touch of Sin uses real news stories to adapt individuals' alienation from sociely values and emotionall detachment to a broade social context; 24 City realises what is happening in a society in transition in the form of restructure state owned enterprises and layoffs, and transmits this trough personalize story telling. However, Still Life focuses on the Three Gorges migrants who displaced by the Three Gorges Project. In Mountains May Depart, Jia Zhangke extends further his concern of changes in the traditional Chinese culture during this transition, manifested by his film's stills in Figure 8. Jia Zhangke studies the conditions of Chinese society in its period of change and studies through his works social contradictions and challenges of the time. He brings forward his unique humanistic viewpoint via the camera, by filming on the vulnerable groups, such as the migrant workers, the laid off workers and the displaced ones resulting from the construction projects.

5. HISTORICAL INSIGHTS IN "JIA ZHANGKE'S" FILMS

Jia Zhangke's cinematic works stand out in contemporary cinema because of his ability to reconstruct history and address the social needs of modern times. Still Life is a prime example of this, reflecting the profound impact of the Three Gorges Project on the transformation of local cities and the lives of the displaced residents. Jia Zhangke's decision to focus on the Three Gorges migrants was intentional, and it reveals his nuanced understanding of history. The Three Gorges Project was an immense national water conservancy initiative that forced over 1.4 million local residents to relocate. At the time, public attention was largely focused on the engineering marvel itself, while the migrant group was scarcely discussed. Jia Zhangke, however, noticed this gap and brought it into the foreground (Zhou, 2021). By doing so, he offered a cinematic lens through which audiences could engage with the often-overlooked human side of this massive project. His empathetic portrayal of these migrants, captured through his evocative use of imagery, offers a profound emotional connection to the struggles they faced during their forced relocation.

Three of the opera stories are combined with the modern stories in the movie to achieve the purpose of borrowing from the past to satirize the present.

Figure 9: Scene Stills from "A Touch of Sin".

A Touch of Sin brings to the screen a stark portrayal of violent events from recent Chinese society, using the powerful combination of traditional opera elements to enrich the storytelling. As seen in *Figure 9*, the film integrates three distinct opera stories with modern narratives, effectively using the past to satirize the present. This fusion not only adds depth to the characters but also amplifies the emotional resonance of the story. In the film's first segment, Hu Hai, driven by desperation, reaches for a shotgun, intending to resolve his troubles through violence. The operatic recitation of "Lin Chong's Night Running" on a village stage mirrors Hu Hai's own turbulent journey. Lin Chong's words—"I, Lin Chong, in a moment of anger, drew my sword and killed Gao Ziang's treacherous spy and two thieves..."—link the classical image of Lin Chong with Hu Hai's modern plight, blending historical narrative with contemporary struggles. Later, as Hu Hai walks out of his house, the background music shifts to "Barium Judge," elevating the tension and foreshadowing the tragic outcome of the story. At the film's conclusion, the operatic theme of *Su San Rising* underscores the emotional weight of the final scene. Xiao Yu, standing amidst a crowd watching the opera, hears the magistrate repeatedly ask, "Su San, do you know your crime?" This line not only questions Su San but also serves as a metaphorical interrogation of Xiao Yu, symbolizing the judgment he faces in his own life. Through these operatic insertions, Jia Zhangke masterfully reconstructs history, using traditional art forms to serve the modern narrative while exploring pressing social issues. A recurring theme in Jia Zhangke's films is his humanistic concern for ordinary people, particularly marginalized individuals. In *The Pickpocket*, Jia Zhangke places a spotlight on characters typically left on the fringes of society. For instance, *Xiaowu*, the protagonist, is a pickpocket—a figure traditionally associated with crime and deviance in mainstream cinema. Rather than reinforcing the stereotype of the thief, Jia Zhangke delves deeper into Xiaowu's humanity, showcasing his struggles and vulnerabilities. This portrayal challenges the audience's preconceived notions of marginalized groups, revealing their complexities and, in doing so, offering a critique of societal exclusion. Through his nuanced portrayal of such characters, Jia Zhangke underscores the humanity within society's marginalized figures. His films do not merely focus on their shortcomings or criminality, but rather emphasize their experiences, struggles, and the broader social context in which they exist. This humanistic approach is a defining feature of Jia Zhangke's filmmaking, creating a more empathetic and nuanced understanding of those often overlooked in contemporary discourse.

6. CONCLUSION

This paper offers a detailed examination of new generation of Chinese film directors in particular Jia Zhangke's works, which describes the complex relationship between geo culture, social change, and historical reflective in his films. Learning from this analysis, we have learned much about the unique roles played by these directors in the development of Chinese society, culture, and history. From such an internationally comparative perspective, it would be possible for future research to systematically research the similarities and differences between Chinese films and those of other countries in terms of narrative structure, choice of themes, and audiovisual language in order to explore further the uniqueness and the cultural value of Chinese films in the world film system. Moreover, the geographical and cultural factors have an impact on creative process of Chinese cinema, particularly the social and cultural characteristics of different regions on narrative strategies and aesthetic styles of director. Furthermore, a study of marginal Chinese cinema narratives should be conducted as well as a longitudinal analysis addressing the historical evolution of the cultural changes in Chinese cinema. In addition to offering theoretical support for how Chinese cinema adapts to cultural and social fluctuations both in the homeland and the outside world, these studies

will also suggest realistic directions for dispensing with Chinese cinema to both positions and the communication strategies abroad. On this basis, future research should also focus on assessing the audience acceptance plus cultural influence of Chinese pictures, specifically involving social issues, historical memory and political consideration. Through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses, the study of audience acceptance patterns, critical contexts, and box office data can more comprehensively assess the functions and limitations of these films in shaping public discourse, influencing cultural memory, and promoting social discussion. An in-depth study of the audience's cultural consumption habits and aesthetic preferences is expected to reveal the adaptability and influence of Chinese film narratives on contemporary social and cultural contexts, thus providing academics with references of theoretical depth and practical significance, and injecting new vitality into the academic discussion on Chinese cinema and cultural transformation.

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