

A People's Director: Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Style

by

Yaxi Luo

Bachelor of Arts, Sichuan University, 2014

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in the Department of Pacific and Asian Studies

© Yaxi Luo, 2017  
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.

## **Supervisory Committee**

A People's Director: Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Style

by

Yaxi Luo

Bachelor of Arts, Sichuan University, 2014

### **Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Richard King, (Department of Pacific and Asian Studies)  
**Supervisor**

Dr. Michael Bodden, (Department of Pacific and Asian Studies)  
**Departmental Member**

## **Abstract**

### **Supervisory Committee**

Dr. Richard King, (Department of Pacific and Asian Studies)  
**Supervisor**

Dr. Michael Bodden, (Department of Pacific and Asian Studies)  
**Departmental Member**

### ABSTRACT

As a leading figure of “The Six Generation” directors, Jia Zhangke’s films focus on reality of contemporary Chinese society, and record the lives of people who were left behind after the country’s urbanization process. He depicts a lot of characters who struggle with their lives, and he works to explore one common question throughout all of his films: “where do I belong?” Jia Zhangke uses unique filmmaking techniques in order to emphasize the feelings of people losing their sense of home. In this thesis, I am going to analyze his cinematic style from three perspectives: photography, musical scores and metaphors. In each chapter, I will use one film as the main subject of discussion and reference other films to complement my analysis.

## Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee .....	ii
Abstract .....	iii
Table of Contents .....	iv
Acknowledgments.....	vi
Introduction.....	1
Chapter One: Jia Zhangke’s “realistic” photography: Depiction of the hometown in <i>Xiao Wu</i> .....	19
1. The Hand-held camera and close-up shots .....	21
2. The long-take shots .....	29
3. Aspect Ratio.....	35
Chapter Two: The pastiche of popular culture in Jia Zhangke’s films: pop music in <i>Mountains May Depart</i> .....	40
1. The Passage of Time .....	43
1.1 1999: Rapid development in society.....	43
1.2 2014: The great shock in Shanxi Province .....	47
1.3 2025 : The home and the hometown.....	50
2. The Sublime Power of Popular Music in Other Ways.....	54
2.1 A communication between characters .....	54
2.2 A symbol of culture .....	56
2.3 A representative of the character .....	58

Chapter Three: Jia Zhangke's unique narrative style : images and metaphors in <i>A Touch of Sin</i> .....	60
1. The Intertextuality Between Literature and Film.....	63
2. Animal Metaphors .....	69
3. The Recurring Plots .....	74
Conclusion .....	79
Bibliography .....	83

## Acknowledgments

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Richard King, for the continuous support and guidance of my M.A. studies. His immense knowledge always inspired me to finish my thesis.

I would like to thank the rest of my committee members: Dr. Michael Bodden and Dr. Zhongping Chen, for their insightful comments that steered me in the right direction.

I also want to thank Dr. Chris Morgan, Karen Tang and Alice Lee, for the support and encouragement that helped me to get through a difficult time.

Finally, I want to thank my family for their support and belief in me throughout the years of my study. This accomplishment would not have been possible without your encouragement.

## Introduction

*If cinema is going to show concern for ordinary people, one must first have respect for everyday life. One must follow the slow rhythm of life and empathize with the light and heavy things of an ordinary life. “Life is like a long, calm river”; let’s experience it.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>1</sup>

*Jia’s early work consists of a series of low-budget films employing non-professional actors about everyday life in small-town China; while the subject matter and presentation may appear crude, they are portraits drawn with masterful visual strokes, displaying sensitivity, style and more than their fair share of cinematic brilliance.*

—Michael Berry<sup>2</sup>

*I found that, compared with Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Feng Xiaogang, Jia Zhangke is a different kind of animal.*

—Chen Danqing<sup>3</sup>

When discussing Chinese cinema, it is usually the Sixth Generation that comes to mind as the generation of directors that brought Chinese independent films to the world stage, gaining international acclaim for their work during the 1990s. The leading figures

---

<sup>1</sup> Jia Zhangke, translated by Claire Huot, Tony Rayns, Alice Shih, and Sebastian Veg, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director’s Texts on Film*. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2015, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke’s ‘Hometown Trilogy’: Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 9.

<sup>3</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director’s Texts on Film*, p. 23.

in this group include Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Lu Chuan, Wang Quan'an and Zhang Yuan<sup>4</sup>. The name, Sixth Generation, comes on the heels of the Fifth Generation, represented by directors such as Zhang Yimou, Chen Kaige and Tian Zhuangzhuang. The Fifth Generation directors have been called the most glorious generation in Chinese film history<sup>5</sup>. They inherited the Cultural Revolution period as a paramount subject from the Fourth Generation<sup>6</sup> and combined it with modern western aesthetics<sup>7</sup>. Many of their works depict Chinese society in the Mao era, especially focusing on the living conditions and status of rural dwellers. The Fifth Generation was the earliest group of Chinese directors to achieve an international reputation. In contrast to the glowing recognition the Fifth Generation has received, the Sixth Generation has had a mixed reception from critics and audiences. Regardless of the global reputation they have achieved and how they have brought Chinese independent cinema to a new level, they are often dismissed as “underground films”, or as having “poor box office returns”, and criticized for the way

---

<sup>4</sup> For further information on the Sixth Generation filmmakers, see Wu Liu, *Above Ground or Under Ground: The Emergence and Transformation of “Sixth Generation” Film-Makers in Mainland China*, M.A. Thesis, University of Victoria, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> For an introduction to the Fifth Generation directors and their works, see zhongguo dianying diwu dai daoyan (The Fifth Generation Directors in Chinese Film Industry), [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/zgzx/60nian/2009-08/26/content\\_8619099.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/zgzx/60nian/2009-08/26/content_8619099.htm)

<sup>6</sup> “The Fourth Generation” refers to people who graduated from the film schools in the 1960s and launched their films in the late 1970s. The leading figures are Wu Yigong, Zhang Aixin, Wu Tianming and Huang Jianzhong. This group of directors experienced the Cultural Revolution, therefore, when they started their careers, this tragic period in Chinese history become the paramount subject. The Fifth Generation directors focused on Chinese society and people who were recovering from the Cultural Revolution. As a result, the Cultural Revolution also becomes one of the main subjects of the Fifth Generation directors’ works.

<sup>7</sup> The Fifth Generation was accused of “Orientalizing”. Yu Jie and Guo Peiyun analyzed this topic in their article “Houzhimin zhuyi yujingxia de zhongguo minzu dianying” (A Research into Chinese National Cinema in the Postcolonial Contest), *Yinshan xuekan* (Yinshan Academic Journal), Vol. 26, no. 6, 42-45. According to her analysis, the Fifth Generation used modern cinema techniques to embody the traditional Chinese culture and created a unique Chinese cinematic style.

they hold a “mirror to a messy reality”. It is true that the Sixth Generation has faced more pressure from the national censorship board and many are suspicious of their intentions, but they insist on uncovering reality and trying to make a voice for the lower classes.

Many of the Sixth Generation directors’ works focus on Chinese “reality,” and record the lives of people left behind by the country’s urbanization process. With the rapid development of society, everything has become different from the past. At the time, the whole society was not just changing but was being destroyed. From a visual perspective, we could see buildings everywhere being torn down. From an invisible perspective, it was a period that destroyed both memories and emotional relationships. This process affected all people, not just the lower classes. Rapid development imposed pressure on individuals and the high speed of change led to the inevitable result of some people being left behind because they were incapable of adapting to their new environment. This situation is what inspired the Sixth Generation and became the main focus of their films. As Jia Zhangke has said: “We cannot ignore those people who have been left behind when the whole country is running forward”<sup>8</sup>. The films of this generation make a great contribution through their representation of the life and conditions of the individual during the rapid development of the country.

Writing about the idea of “The Sixth Generation,” Jia Zhangke mentions in an essay: “The reason that a film director does not want to categorize him or herself is either because he or she wants to emphasize his or her uniqueness or because he or she wants to

---

<sup>8</sup> According to an interview: “Jia Zhangke: buneng yinwei gaosu fazhan er hulve ruoshi renqun” (We cannot ignore the vulnerable group while the economics were in a rapid development.) <http://v.ifeng.com/opinion/china/200903/bb1e82df-8a0b-43fa-bc0f-645ed46c9c99.shtml>

avoid having anything to do with negative impressions of his or her generation.”<sup>9</sup> The Sixth Generation is identified with this desire to escape categorization through their own unique exploration of issues of identity in the face of rapid development and urbanization. Their personalized filmmaking style has gained increasing recognition both domestically and abroad.

This thesis will focus on the films of director Jia Zhangke, one of the members of the Sixth Generation. My motivation for this topic is not only that he has made significant contributions to Chinese independent film, but also that his cinematic style is worthy of research. Jia Zhangke’s films depict characters struggling with their lives set against the backdrop of their hometown origins. Hometown becomes both the setting and subject of all Jia’s films and through these spaces he raises important questions about individual identity: Where do I belong? Does this hometown under development still belong to me?

The characters in Jia Zhangke’s films undergo a process of loss and alienation; they go from having a home, to losing their connection with home, and finally to losing themselves as a result of being unable to find a place where they feel they belong. This character development in relation to one’s sense of home and belonging is already evident in Jia’s early career in such films as *Xiao Wu* (Xiaowu, 1997), *Platform* (Zhantai, 2000) and *Unknown Pleasures* (Renxiaoyao, 2002). These three films form a trilogy loosely based on his home province of Shanxi. In fact, images of his hometown have appeared in almost every film he directs, which illustrates the deep feelings he has for this particular place.

---

<sup>9</sup> For a complete version in Chinese, see the link: <https://www.douban.com/note/81901177/>  
Provided by Weimuer and Zhao Daguai.

Jia Zhangke uses unique filmmaking techniques in order to emphasize the feelings of people losing their sense of home. In this thesis, I am going to analyze three main techniques. In the first chapter, I analyze three aspects of his photography and visual imagery, namely, his use of the handheld camera, close-up and long-take shots, and aspect ratio<sup>10</sup>. In the second chapter, I will focus on the significance of musical scores and song selection and how Jia uses music to bring particular meaning to his films. In the third chapter, I will explore the images and metaphors he uses in his films. I will explain why he chooses these metaphors and what effect he wants to achieve with them. In each chapter, I will use one film as the main subject of discussion and reference other films to complement my analysis.

## Literature Review and Current Studies

### *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy': Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*

Success came early in Jia Zhangke's career. His first official film, *Xiao Wu*, won seven awards, among them the Wolfgang Staudte Award at the Berlin International Film Festival<sup>11</sup>. This made him well known on the international stage. Subsequently, he

---

<sup>10</sup> For an introduction of the aspect ratio in the film industry, see the link: <http://107cine.com/stream/69056>. The most common aspect ratio used in cinemas today are 1.85:1 and 2.39:1 while the video-graphic ones are 4:3 and 16:9.

<sup>11</sup> Berlin International Film Festival is praised with Cannes International Film Festival and Venice International Film Festival as three most influential films festivals in the world. *Xiao Wu* was won NETPAC (Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema) Award and Wolfgang Staudte Award at the 1998 Berlin International Film Festival. In the same year, it also won the Golden Montgolfiere at the Nantes Three Continents Festival, New Currents Award at the Pusan International Film Festival and the Dragons and Tigers Award at the Vancouver International Film Festival. In 1999, *Xiao Wu* won another two awards.

released *Platform* in 2000 and *Unknown Pleasures* in 2002 further establishing his reputation in global film circles and making him a leading figure of the Sixth Generation. Much academic research has been devoted to Jia and his films, especially these early works.

In *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy': Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, Michael Berry discusses his own experience of Jia's work<sup>12</sup>:

I couldn't wait to see any of Jia Zhangke's new films, almost all of them are masterpieces. But speaking of my experience, I felt more passionate and excited when I watched *Xiao Shan Going Home*<sup>13</sup>, *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*. ... Moreover, these early films also represent a kind of intensive and sensitive observation, even the smallest details cannot escape in front of the camera<sup>14</sup>.

Berry gives a new perspective to his comprehensive analysis of Jia Zhangke's hometown trilogy, especially in his comparison of the film *Xiao Wu* with Lu Xun's famous text, "The True Story of Ah Q" ("A Q zhengzhuan")<sup>15</sup>. According to Berry, the self-conscious and pessimistic character of *Xiao Wu* is based on Ah Q.<sup>16</sup> Berry examines how this early text relates to Jia Zhangke's film. As he notes, "One of the most

---

<sup>12</sup> Michael Berry is a professor of Modern Chinese Literature and Film at the University of California. His research area includes modern and contemporary Chinese literature, Chinese cinema, popular culture in modern China, and literary translation. For more information and publications, see <http://www.alc.ucla.edu/person/michael-berry/>.

<sup>13</sup> A short film that was made in 1995 while Jia Zhangke was attending the Beijing Film Academy.

<sup>14</sup> Michael Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy': Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, Preface of the Chinese Edition, xiangguan hechu: Jia Zhangke de guxiang sanbuqu. Guangxi Normal University Press, 2010, pp. 001-002.

<sup>15</sup> "The True Story of Ah Q" is one of Lu Xun's famous stories. It portrays a character named Ah Q, who is an idle member of the lower class. People despise him and make fun of him.

<sup>16</sup> For more information see Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, pp.51-62.

fascinating reinventions comes with *Xiao Wu*, which I suggest is actually a post-socialist reimagination of China's ultimate allegorical anti-hero --- Ah Q."<sup>17</sup>

Berry compares the image of Ah Q and the main character in *Xiao Wu* from two aspects: identity and "Spiritual Victory".<sup>18</sup> By comparing the film *Xiao Wu* with Lu Xun's tale of "The True Story of Ah Q", Berry concludes that Jia Zhangke effectively connects neo-realism and literary texts in a way that brings the character of Ah Q to life like never before: "As powerful a cultural symbol as Ah Q has been, he has almost always remained an allegorical caricature. *Xiao Wu*, however, elevates Ah Q to the realm of the real and does so in a manner that remains virtually transparent to most casual audiences."<sup>19</sup>

Berry uses the relationship between the film *Xiao Wu* and the text "The True Story of Ah Q" as an example to explain one of the most important aesthetic features in Jia Zhangke's films: intertextual interventions<sup>20</sup>. Berry's analysis includes the ways that Jia Zhangke connects literature to films. As I will show in the second section of my thesis, this technique appears frequently in Jia's films. In *A Touch of Sin* (Tianzhuding, 2013), he uses symbolic detail to create the character Da Hai, who opposes the village chief and the coal mine owner's corruption. This symbolic imagery reminds the audience of the character of Xia Yu in Lu Xun's work "Medicine" ("Yao"). Both Da Hai and Xia Yu's

---

<sup>17</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p.41.

<sup>18</sup> Also called "the spirit of Ah Q", this refers to an activity of self-deception, self-mockery and narcissism. However, Ah Q usually uses the characteristics of "Spiritual Victory" to comfort himself and he never defends for himself against others. Lu Xun uses this image to satirically uncover the Chinese people's mental condition.

<sup>19</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p.44.

<sup>20</sup> See Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*. I will explore this topic in more depth in the third chapter.

failures indicate the dangers of rising up in revolt at a time when the people are still ignorant, numb, and unconscious. Another example of intertextuality, this time drawing from film, is reflected in *A Touch of Sin*, where Jia Zhangke uses chivalric elements recalling female characters in traditional martial-arts films in portraying the character Xiao Yu as a swordsman without the super power, which Jia called “disabled swordsman”.

In addition, Berry also offers a lot of details and background information about Jia’s filmmaking in this book. He discusses the significance of particular objects that appear in Jia Zhangke’s hometown trilogy including a cigarette lighter, modes of transportation, and popular songs. Jia Zhangke represents his intent through detailed imagery. For example, the first tool that Xiao Wu uses to light his cigarette is a box of matches. The film has an extreme close-up shot of Xiao Wu’s hand --- we see two large characters on the box of matches that read “Shanxi”. What Jia Zhangke said about this shot is: “It was really a rarity for a camera crew to come to a place like Shanxi and face the reality there, so I wanted to make this clear from the beginning. Thus the hands of the thief and the matches for Shanxi.”<sup>21</sup> The second time when Xiao Wu lights a cigarette he uses a lighter that he stole from Xiao Yong. The lighter peters out and dies, which symbolizes the friendship between Xiao Yong and Xiao Wu coming to an end.

Jia and his cinematographer Yu Lik Wai<sup>22</sup> both rely heavily on the use of popular music in their films. Berry mentions that “in Yu’s *Neon Goddesses*, a documentary about three women in Beijing, several themes including a strong attention to popular music (the

---

<sup>21</sup> Michael Berry, *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese Filmmakers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, p. 202.

<sup>22</sup> Cinematographer of almost all of Jia Zhangke’s films, including *Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *The World*, *Still Life* and *Mountains May Depart*.

first five minutes of the film eschew dialogue completely in favour of a virtual arsenal of pop music references) and depictions of local ‘clamp downs’ on vice would all become signature elements of Jia’s later films.”<sup>23</sup>

Music is an important element in Jia Zhangke’s films, and he uses many popular songs. I will analyze Jia Zhangke’s musical selection in the second chapter of this thesis and refer to information that Berry offers in his book. As Berry notes: “All of this points to the painstaking manner in which Jia, cinematographer Yu Lik Wai and their collaborators manipulate framing, pacing, composition and editing not simply in service of style but in order to complement the characters and their predicaments.”<sup>24</sup>

If Jia Zhangke is the keen observer of a changing Chinese society, then Michael Berry is the accurate researcher that can analyze the films in relation to the Chinese people, Chinese society, and China. Berry quotes a sentence from Jia Zhangke: “You can’t say that simply because that generation’s material life is richer, their lives are happier. What I really want to focus on is, over the course of this transformation, who is paying the price? What kinds of people are paying the price?”<sup>25</sup>

*Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*

Unlike other directors of the Sixth Generation, Jia Zhangke opens up to the public. He gives frequent interviews, talks about his films, and he has also written extensively

---

<sup>23</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p. 22.

<sup>24</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p. 27.

<sup>25</sup> Lin Xudong, Zhang Yaxuan and Gu Zheng, *Jia Zhangke dianying: Zhantai*. Beijing: Zhongguo Mangwen Press, 2003, p. 191.

about his intentions or motivations for making his films. I believe that his director's notes are the most authoritative and accurate materials to represent his thoughts. His book, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film (Chinese Edition: jiaxiang 1996-2008)*, offers comprehensive information regarding his filmmaking process. The book contains selections of Jia Zhangke's own writing on films, his notes on his own productions as well as on Chinese culture, and also some interviews from other filmmakers. The Chinese edition published in 2009 does not cover later films like *Still Life* (Sanxia Haoren, 2006) and *Mountains May Depart* (Shanhe Guren, 2015). However, this book still offers valuable information on Jia Zhangke's early films. Since the hometown trilogy is the most representative of his films, this book gives us a better understanding of his early work and his transformation during the later period.

For example, Jia Zhangke discusses his motivation and purpose in producing *Xiao Wu*: "The news of the imminent demolition of the buildings [in Fenyang, Shanxi province] was also a factor that inspired me to make *Xiao Wu*. It's not about nostalgia for the old, but by showing the course of the demolition, you can visualize the profound and concrete effects of social transformations on the lives of people of the lower strata of a small town."<sup>26</sup> He also explains in detail why he uses a unique photographic technique in this film, and provides the transcript of a conversation with Lin Xudong, a member of the jury at the Hong Kong International Film Festival. In this conversation, Jia Zhangke discusses the reason why he decided to film *Xiao Wu* in his hometown: "it necessarily has some

---

<sup>26</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 100.

connection to my background when I was growing up.”<sup>27</sup> He also explains why his hometown plays an important role in his films. This information gives another perspective for analyzing his films.

Most of the text is written from Jia Zhangke’s point of view. The first section is dedicated to the director’s notes on his films. He picks some representative plots to give a simple but appropriate summary. For example, he talks about a plot in *Platform*: when Ruijuan is dancing to the music in the office, then, in the next scene, she rides a motorcycle peacefully through the town. Jia Zhangke explains that: “I don’t want to provide reasons or explain why a young girl who was dancing is suddenly wearing a tax-clerk uniform or why she is still single after so many years. This is my narrative philosophy.”<sup>28</sup> Actually, this is a unique technique that Jia Zhangke uses. We usually see some transit scenes in the films, which seems not to fit in the plot. These scenes represent some ideas that Jia Zhangke wants to express. As he notes: “this is especially important when it comes to our understanding of change, even we ourselves don’t understand when or where or why we’ve changed. What we see is the result. The result is all we can know.”<sup>29</sup> From this book, we get the most important and useful resources from the director himself; it helps to understand his thoughts and actions with greater accuracy and depth.

### Current Studies

---

<sup>27</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 89. The title of the conversation is “A People’s Director from The Grassroots of China” (yige laizi zhongguo jiceng de minjian daoyan). Jia Zhangke believes he is a people’s director from the grassroots of China. I also use “A People’s Director” (minjian daoyan) as my thesis title.

<sup>28</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>29</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 47.

As a leading figure of the Sixth Generation, Jia Zhangke's films have been the subject of intense study. Jennifer Germann's M.A. Thesis "*Documenting Postsocialist Reality: The Films of Jia Zhangke*" analyzes his films from three main aspects: documentary filmmaking, the postsocialist condition, and film realism<sup>30</sup>. Her thesis gives detailed background information regarding the Chinese film industry from the 1980's to the present. She pays attention to the social and cultural environment, especially economic reforms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century and how these economic reforms have had a significant impact on the Sixth Generation. She also analyzes the unique features of Jia Zhangke's films from various perspectives.

Song Tingting in her PhD Dissertation "*Independent cinema in the Chinese film industry*" uses media economics in her research approach that includes an analysis of both the American and Chinese independent cinema industries<sup>31</sup>. In her introduction to the Chinese independent cinema industry, she looks at private companies, emerging companies and companies backed by foreign capital. Her dissertation provides a good background resource for my thesis.

Another study about Chinese independent films is a PhD dissertation from Yang Mei, "*Cinematic Realism and Independent Filmmaking in China*"<sup>32</sup>. She gives an analysis of Chinese independent films' beginning and development. She divides the Sixth Generation into three groups: the first group includes directors focused on filming the under-class; the second group includes "underground directors"; the third group includes

---

<sup>30</sup> Jennifer Germann, *Documenting Postsocialist Reality: The Films of Jia Zhangke*, M. A. Thesis, McGill University, 2010.

<sup>31</sup> Song Tingting, *Independent cinema in the Chinese film industry*, PhD Dissertation, Queensland University of Technology, 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Mei Yang, *Cinematic Realism and Independent Filmmaking in China*, PhD Dissertation, University of Oregon, 2011.

those directors that the author identifies as post-Sixth Generation. She explores a lot of films by the different groups' directors. In her dissertation, she discusses numerous "Sixth Generation" films, one of them being Jia Zhangke's *Unknown Pleasures*. She analyzes this film from a variety of perspectives, most important is her exploration of two filming techniques used by Jia Zhangke that I will examine in my thesis as well: cinematography and music. She concludes that *Unknown Pleasures* is a DV<sup>33</sup> feature which offers "a quiet, observant and sometimes abstract cinematic style, ... The camera helps them land an alternative historicity that restores their subjectivity in the outskirts of China's economic glories."<sup>34</sup> She also provides an important view on the use of music in Jia's films: "It is pointed out that popular music has the sublime power to transcend and transform, as every time the song [referring to the song *In the Mood for Love*] reappears, the rendition changes and the atmosphere it carries is converted to a different level." Her analysis of *Unknown Pleasures* gives me a new perspective from which to understand Jia's films.

In brief, the material in these dissertations and theses have been helpful in my research and I will use some of their points to enrich the part of the background information in my thesis. However, my thesis will be different than their works. Jennifer Germann's M.A. Thesis focus on the social and cultural environment that Chinese independent film industry faced to, and Song Tingting focus on the political and historical aspects of Chinese independent film industry in her PhD Dissertation. The framework I use in this thesis will be analyzing Jia Zhangke's unique cinematic style by using his films as case studies. Yang Mei also use case study in her PhD Dissertation.

---

<sup>33</sup> Short for Digital Video. It becomes a feature of video recording in 1995.

<sup>34</sup> Mei Yang, *Cinematic Realism and Independent Filmmaking in China*, 2011.

The difference between her dissertation and my thesis is that she focusses on a lot of the Sixth Generation directors while I will focus on one director, Jia Zhangke.

### Methodology

As noted above, my core purpose is to analyze Jia Zhangke's film, especially in terms of filming techniques used. Therefore, my main approach in this thesis is film analysis based on a variety of methodologies. In the first chapter, I will use iconic analysis<sup>35</sup> to explore how pictorial elements convey meaning in Jia Zhangke's films, especially with regards to cinematography. In the second chapter, I will use this same approach to analyze the use of music in Jia Zhangke's films and see how the musical elements influence mood. In the third chapter, I will use semiotic analysis to examine the significance of metaphors and images that occur in Jia Zhangke's films.

In film studies, one of the most common research approaches is textual analysis of screenplays yet critical textual analysis of Chinese independent films remains limited for several reasons. For one, Chinese independent films develop slowly and with difficulty. These independent films are also referred to as "underground films," and many of them are never screened in China, even though they are well known in the global film market (For example, Jia Zhangke has filmed more than ten movies, but only three feature films have been released to the public in China, they were *The World*, *Still Life* and *Mountains May Depart*). Given the absence of critical texts on the subject, I will base my analysis on the films themselves and those texts I have introduced in my literature review; moreover, I will strive to connect the historical background as well as bring in the social and cultural

---

<sup>35</sup> An approach of film analysis introduced by Thomas Sobchack and Vivian Sobchack. *An Introduction to Film*. Second Edition. Boston: Pearson Education, 1987.

environment of the times in which these films were made. A fast-growing cultural environment not only offers rich materials to the director, but also presents a number of challenges. With this in mind, I will explore both the advantages and the disadvantages that the cultural environment brings to the filmmaking industry, especially in Jia Zhangke's films.

#### Outline of the chapters

This thesis is divided into three parts with each part devoted to an aspect of Jia Zhangke's film techniques. Every part is further broken down into two sections: firstly, I will analyze a film to show how Jia Zhangke uses a unique technique in it; secondly, there will be analysis of this same technique in other films in order to support these ideas.

Chapter One will describe photography and visual imagery. *Xiao Wu* is the best film to illustrate the unique photography as Jia Zhangke uses a variety of different cameras. I will examine this subject from three aspects. In the first section, I will focus on the handheld camera and the close-up shots. This kind of photography brings the audience a more realistic feeling. Different from traditional photography, the handheld camera is easy to hide, which makes it look like secret photography, and it is used to give the film *Xiao Wu* a realistic lens. This is helpful in understanding the film and emphasizing the bleak life of the main character. Most scenes filmed with the handheld camera represent the chaos of crowds of people and the fears and anxieties in their hearts. The shaking camera is one handheld camera technique that is used especially to reflect the identity of the main character Xiao Wu. It is also used in representing the relationship between two characters, Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong. This time, the shaking camera indicates that their

relationship is in crisis. In another instance, the shaking camera symbolizes theft. From Xiao Wu's perspective, his life is like the camera, full of dark and secrets, and will never be warm and bright.

On other hand, I will explore another technique in this film, the close-up. Jia Zhangke uses it to show the relationships between the characters. For Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong's friendship, Jia Zhangke focuses on a lighter as a symbol of their friendship. Every close-up shot of the lighter shows important events concerning their relationship. Similarly, a ring represents the relationship between Xiao Wu and Meimei. The ring is a token of Xiao Wu's love, but it will never be delivered to the one he wants to give it to. Finally, the pager is the bond between Xiao Wu and his parents. It represents the gap, or the barrier to his relationship with his family.

In the second section, Jia Zhangke uses a long-shot at the ending. The camera focuses on Xiao Wu's face and rests there for forty-five seconds of film. The director tries to use a first-person perspective to convey a sense of identification with the character. When Xiao Wu is exposed in front of the camera, what he sees becomes what the audiences sees, and therefore, the audience is able to understand the character's mood. It also points out that everyone is the main character in their own lives, and no one can live as a bystander.

In the last section, I will analyze photographic technique in *Mountains May Depart*, a film in which Jia Zhangke uses different aspect ratios to indicate different time frames. As this film has an episode structure sequenced by time, Jia Zhangke uses three different aspect ratios to indicate different time. I will use *Mountains May Depart* as an example to explore this unique technique.

Chapter Two will reflect upon the popular songs Jia Zhangke uses in his films. I will use *Mountains May Depart* as the example. Songs play an important role in this film, starting with the Pet Shop Boys' song "Go West", which brings the audience to the 1990s. Additionally, Jia Zhangke uses "Farewell" (Zhenzhong, by Ye Qianwen) several times in the film as the lyrics appropriately represent the relationship between the characters. In each episode, time and places change, but every time a song is heard, the characters feel a connection to the past. In Jia Zhangke's early work, songs always play the role of representing periods of time. For example, Karaoke is a recurring image in Jia Zhangke's Hometown Trilogy, as this form of entertainment was popular in places during the transitional period. Jia noted that: "At the edge of my old hometown there used to be an 'open economic zone' called Fenyang Bazaar. Clothes and such things used to be on sale there. But when I went to take a look this time, all there was were karaoke bars!"<sup>36</sup> He also chose the most popular songs that everyone was singing at the time. He feels "it creates a strange sense of belonging. Such things are, in fact, a reflection of society's morale."<sup>37</sup> I will extend this topic and examine the different roles of songs in the second part of this chapter. First, I will explore songs as a form of communication between characters and as a way to express the characters' thoughts that they are incapable of presenting them directly. Second, I will examine songs as a symbol of culture. As I mention above, sometimes songs represent a particular time and culture. Last, I will examine songs as representative of characters. In some cases, the lyrics capture a state similar to that being experienced by the character and the song becomes a voice from the character's heart.

---

<sup>36</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 99.

<sup>37</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 113.

Chapter Three will analyze metaphors and recurring elements within the films. I will use the film *A Touch of Sin* to illustrate Jia Zhangke's use of such techniques. In this film, he uses many metaphors to build a narrative system, including intertextuality from literature, animal metaphors and some recurring plots. In the first section, I will discuss intertextuality in the film *A Touch of Sin*. As noted in the literature review section, Michael Berry examines the intertextual relationship between the film *Xiao Wu* and Lu Xun's fiction "The True Story of Ah Q". A similar technique can be observed in *A Touch of Sin*. Jia uses intertextuality not only with literature, but also with other films. Even the title, *A Touch of Sin*, is from the Wuxia film *A Touch of Zen*<sup>38</sup> (Xianü, 1971). I will explore the intertextuality Jia Zhangke uses when he depicts the characters.

In the second section of the chapter, I will analyze the metaphor of animals. In each story of *A Touch of Sin*, there is more than one kind of recurrent animal image, and each animal has some similarities to a character in the story. I will give details about how Jia Zhangke uses animals to represent the characters. In the last section, I will point to some recurring features in Jia Zhangke's films that he uses to build a symbolic system of special meanings in his films. In order to get a better understanding of his films, I will compare the recurring features and give my opinions about their meanings. By using these images and metaphors, it serves to analyze the content of the film and also displays real society in the eyes of Jia Zhangke.

---

<sup>38</sup> See the link: <http://www.easternkicks.com/news/jia-zhangke-in-london-gas-at-the-bfi-and-kings-college>

## Chapter One: Jia Zhangke's "realistic" photography: Depiction of the hometown in *Xiao Wu*

*This film is about the anxiety of living, how swiftly beautiful things disappear from our lives. In the face of failure and personal hardship, life once again becomes a solitary affair, tinged with a kind of nobility.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>39</sup>

*In the midst of chaotic streets, strident noise, and impermanent relationships, the characters seek escape by any means. And yet, listening to the toneless singing in the soon-to-be-demolished old buildings of Fenyang, we are somehow confident that, on the audiovisual plane, something is bound to happen.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>40</sup>

### Introduction

As a leading figure of the Sixth Generation directors, Jia Zhangke is famous for exposing social taboos and creating a truly critical and sharp historic viewpoint. In his early career, he directed a loose trilogy based in his home province of Shanxi, which contains *Xiao Wu* (Xiaowu, 1997), *Platform* (Zhantai, 2000) and *Unknown Pleasures* (Renxiaoyao, 2002). Through these films, he describes his hometown drawing from his experiences and illustrating its changes during the reform period. These movies were a

---

<sup>39</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 36.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

huge success and boosted Jia's career. This led him to continue to make more films based in his hometown. As a result, many scholars and researchers think that his work illustrates the deep feelings he has towards his hometown.

Hometown is an important topic in Chinese culture, especially in Chinese literature. There are many poems using hometown as a topic; the poems describe one's hometown as a warm place featuring nostalgic memories. For example, *To the Tune of Chang Xiang Si* by Nalan Xingde:

Over mountains, over rivers  
We plod to the Shanhai Pass.  
A myriad of fires light the night  
From our camp on the river bank.  
The shrieking snowstorm breaks my dream  
Of my peaceful, tranquil home.<sup>41</sup>

This poem depicts the hometown as a warm and peaceful place. However, in Jia Zhangke's film *Xiao Wu*, the definition of hometown changes completely. Jia shows us a realistic hometown that differs from our imagination by using his unique filmmaking skills, especially in the aspects of photography and visual imagery. I will explore the subject from three perspectives. In the first section, I will analyze two kinds of photography, the hand-held camera and the close-up shots. For example, he uses some images of Shanxi province to provide the impression of the hometown and displays this by showing the close-up shots of license plate of Fenyang and the two big written

---

<sup>41</sup> Translation by Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie (Gladys Yang). From

<http://www.en84.com/dianji/ci/200912/00000720.html>. The original version in Chinese is: 山一程，水一程，身向榆关那畔行。夜深千帐灯。风一更，雪一更，聒碎乡心梦不成。故园无此声。

characters “Shanxi” on the matchbox. In the second section, I will examine several long-take shots he used both in *Xiao Wu* and his other films. These long-take shots give open-ended opinions and are worth analysis. In the last section, I will focus on the different types of aspect ratio that Jia Zhangke uses in his films. I will begin with an analysis of *Xiao Wu* then focus on the film *Mountains May Depart* as it contains three different aspect ratios in one film.

In this chapter, I will focus on Jia Zhangke’s first official film, *Xiao Wu*, and will mention some of his other films as well. My primary reference will be the director’s own notes from *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director's Texts on Film*. I will also refer to Michael Berry’s book *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy': Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures* and extend his argument with further explanation and give my own opinions.

### 1. The Hand-held camera and close-up shots

*In the end, the edgy hand-held camera work that punctuates Xiao Wu’s visual style does not distract as much as complement the overarching vision of the film, with the unpolished images reinforcing the gritty nature of the story and the dark reality the protagonist finds himself enmeshed in.*

—Michael Berry<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>42</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p.26.

Hometown represents a person's origins. It is the foundation for one's personal map of reality and contributes to how one behaves. For most people, their hometown represents the love, comfort and security felt in childhood. As a result, it is shown in films with warm and bright images, such as warm fire, bright lights, friendly relationships and so on. For example, in the film *Hachiko: A Dog's Tale* (dir. Lasse Hallstrom, 2009), when the professor adopts the dog Hachiko, he lives in a place with warm light, blankets and full of love from the family members and other people in the town. Every morning when he walks the professor to the train station, he gets some sausage on his way back. When he waits outside of the station, people coming out from the station always say hi to him. After the professor dies, the station officer and the vendor outside the station take the responsibility to take care of him. The whole town looks like his home; that is a traditional image of hometown. However, in Jia Zhangke's film *Xiao Wu*, Jia uses a very dark colour with every frame, grainy photography and broken relationships to overturn the traditional view of hometown. Unlike other directors that describe town and countryside using warm and bright images, Jia uses hand-held cameras to film. Traditionally used as a documentary filming technique, this kind of photography- often referred to as cinema verité or verité-style cinema- creates a sense of reality. Jason McGrath notes that because of the themes and stylistic features, "It is generally agreed that Jia Zhangke's films embody a bold new style of urban realism."<sup>43</sup> These features can be seen in every one of Jia's films and are illustrative of his photography style.

*Xiao Wu* is Jia Zhangke's first feature film. Yu Lik Wai, who is the director of photography for *Xiao Wu*, discusses the documentary style photography in an interview:

---

<sup>43</sup> Chris Berry. *Chinese Films in Focus II*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008. p. 250.

Because there are very few films produced [in Shanxi], the locals always got excited and quite curious at the sight of the movie camera, they would tend to huddle together off to one side watching. We thought of all kinds of techniques to avoid this, even considering getting another group of people to create a scene nearby to draw their attention away, but nothing really worked.

So we had no choice but to wait...we would just kill time until the crowds all tired out and went home to eat. We had to do our best to avoid environments that were overly complicated. And in case where that was impossible, we had to find other methods, like hiding the camera or appropriating guerrilla film-making techniques—shooting quickly and then hightailing it out of there—all of these are quite similar to documentary film styles.<sup>44</sup>

The unique shots taken to make the film *Xiao Wu* give a realistic lens in order to understand the film and emphasize the bleak life of the main character. More importantly, it accurately represents the story of the protagonist Xiao Wu. The whole beginning of the film is linked by close-up shots of hands. First, Xiao Wu is standing by the road, a close-up shot of Xiao Wu's hands shows that he is lighting a cigarette. Then he put his right hand up to request a bus to stop. After boarding the bus, the camera focus on his right hand as he is holding a handrail, it shows a tattoo on his right arm. The tattoo is a dragon with four characters: 有难同当 (Younan tongdang, which means "share the hardship", it is a partial sentence from a Chinese proverb. We can see the other half of the same proverb later, tattooed on Xiao Yong's arm: 有福同享, Youfu tongxiang, which means "share the happiness"). Then the scene turns to the other side, Xiao Wu hides his hands all the time when he is talking to the bus conductor and avoiding paying for the ticket,

---

<sup>44</sup> Lin Xudong, Zhang Yaxuan, Gu Zhengbian. "*Jia Zhangke dianying: Renxiaoyao*" (A film directed by Jia Zhangke: *Unknown Pleasures*), Beijing: Zhongguo Mangwen Press, 2003. pp. 116-117.

and the camera focuses on his hidden hands all the time. Later in the film, the close-up shot of hands is shown again when Xiao Wu is stealing a wallet from the person who sits with him. All of these close-up shots focus on one thing: Xiao Wu's hands. As Jia Zhangke has commented, "I decided to open the film with a shot of his hands because he is a pickpocket, a thief, and his hands are the tools of his trade."<sup>45</sup> After these scenes displaying his identity, the camera focuses on Mao Zedong's picture that hangs in the front of the bus. During the war, Mao had a military doctrine: no confiscation of peasant property<sup>46</sup> (不拿群众一针一线, *Buna qunzhong yizhenyixian*). If soldiers were found taking anything from peasant, they would be punished severely. When Mao's picture shows up, it represents the rules, which are juxtaposed to the recent happenings inside the bus. But the difference is, Chairman Mao no longer has the power to prevent Xiao Wu from stealing or even punish him for now. This scene is an example of how Jia uses satire to illustrate how the old rules have been invalidated in contemporary society.

The plot moves on to Xiao Wu's life in his hometown, Fenyang. The government is distributing propaganda about "strike hard" (严打, *Yanda*) in the street ("Strike hard" is a formula for taking severe measures against grave illegal and criminal activities). Xiao Wu and his working partners are walking by and one of them is asked by a journalist, what is "strike hard?" A group of people waits around him and listen to see what he will say. Then, Xiao Wu pushes his partner out of the crowd of people. During this sequence, the photography switches back to the hand-held camera angle. The rolling camera represents their illicit occupation. What's more, because they are the target of "strike

---

<sup>45</sup> Berry, *Speaking in Images*, p. 202.

<sup>46</sup> From the Three Rules of Discipline and Eight Points for Attention.

hard," the rolling camera also represents the chaos around them and the fear and anxiety deep in their hearts. In this plot, it is the first time that the image of a crowd of people is shown in the film (there is another long-take shot of the crowd at the end of the film which I will analyze in the second section.). The close-up shot stays on the face of Xiao Wu's partner and the people around him for more than ten seconds. From the perspective of Xiao Wu's partner, the close-up shot of the crowd shows the pressure on him and the hand-held camera represents his fear and anxiety; from the perspective of the crowd, they stare at the young boy, and act as strangers. The close-up shot catches the faces without any facial expressions, and indicates that the relationship between the folks in this town has changed; they have become indifferent. Jia Zhangke points to this in his director's notes when he states, "The dejection, the loss of any romance in human relationships...it was shocking."

Another hand-held camera shot appears when Xiao Wu is walking by his friend Xiao Yong's home. They used to be partners and best friends. Xiao Yong was successful building his career after he quit being a thief, while Xiao Wu is still a lower-class thief, so their relationship is broken. Xiao Wu suffers inner conflicts regarding this friendship. On one hand, he wants to rebuild their relationship. On the other hand, the difference between him and Xiao Yong cannot be ignored, so he understands that their relationship will never be as it was before. In this example, without word and conversation, the rolling camera comes to Xiao Yong's home and as they walk by, it separately follows Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong. They pass by a wall outside Xiao Yong's home that holds memories about their friendship and then walk in different directions. The rolling frame represents the intense emotion in Xiao Wu's heart. The wall completely represents the youthful

friendship between these two characters. The wall is carved with several lines showing the height of these two friends at different times throughout the years (a traditional way to record children's growth). As the time goes by, the wall and the lines remain, but the friendship has gone forever.

There are several close-up shots of the wall. At the beginning of the film, when Xiao Yong decides not to invite Xiao Wu to his wedding, Xiao Yong passes by the wall and touches the lines. Another day when Xiao Wu passes the same wall, this action is reflected as he does the same thing. At almost the same time, Xiao Yong walks by a second time without seeing this. The close-up shots clearly record the different attitudes between Xiao Yong and Xiao Wu, as a symbol that bears witness to their friendship, the shots of the wall explain how the relationship has changed.

Besides exemplifying Xiao Wu's identity as a thief, the hand-held camera is also used to display the microcosm of Xiao Wu's life. The dark light of the hand-held camera is like the main color of Xiao Wu's life, which can never see the silver linings. With the rapid development of China's economy, his hometown is changed immediately and completely, and he is left behind. Every time he carefully attempts to approach the majority (the group of people who are not marked as marginalized persons), he is continually unsuccessful and gets nowhere.

The film illustrates this particular failure from three aspects: friendship, love and family. When he tries to prepare a gift for his best friend Xiao Yong's wedding, he makes his change into one hundred yuan notes and asks Geng Sheng to wrap the money with red paper. In the majority's opinion, big bills are a symbol of identity and money in the form of change is looked down upon. Money covered by red paper, represents happy and lucky.

Both of these actions show that Xiao Wu wants to present his best wishes to Xiao Yong. Xiao Wu clearly remembers the days he spent with Xiao Yong and his promise to give 3kg of money to Xiao Yong when Xiao Yong married. Apparently it was joke, but Xiao Wu still remembers it and he still treasures their friendship. However, when Xiao Yong receives the money, he immediately returns it to Xiao Wu. As a successful business man, he does not care about this money, and moreover, he suspects it to be “dirty money.” Ultimately, he does not care about Xiao Wu, who lives in a completely different world from him.

When Xiao Wu is dealing with his love life, the same situation happens. He meets a girl named Meimei at a karaoke bar. Meimei is someone from another group of marginalized persons. She lives in a poor environment and works at a job she does not like. But she is optimistic and holds on to her dreams. This courage is an important feature that Xiao Wu does not have. Every time Meimei ask Xiao Wu to sing a song with her, Xiao Wu refuses because of his fear to expose himself in society. Meimei’s singing represents a connection between Xiao Wu and society, and because of this, Xiao Wu is attracted to Meimei. He tries his best to be nice to Meimei; he goes to her room to see her when she is ill, he buys a hot water bottle for her, he brings a pager so they can contact each other and he even resumes his “occupation” to make money for a ring he plans to give as a gift for Meimei. In the end, he does not get the chance to send her this ring. While Xiao Wu was working at becoming closer to Meimei, she becomes involved with a rich man. At last, the camera turns to a bathhouse where Xiao Wu is naked and taking a bath in the pool. He is singing a song that he at one point refused to sing with Meimei (I

will analyze this song in Chapter Two). After all of his efforts failed, he finally opens his mind to accept himself.

After breaking the relationships with friend and lover, Xiao Wu finally comes back to his hometown and his family. However, when Xiao Wu's father asks his sons to contribute to the youngest son's wedding, everyone mutually shirks this request. This becomes the first conflict. In the next scene, a second conflict arises when the ring Xiao Wu brought for Meimei is on the hand of his second sister-in-law. Xiao Wu's second brother lies to everyone saying his mother-in-law bought the ring. What is more, Xiao Wu's mother is trying to cover up for her second son's transgression and fights with Xiao Wu over the matter. As a result, Xiao Wu's father kicks Xiao Wu out of the house. With this action, the last tie to his home is broken. When he walks alone down the country road, he turns and looks back at his home. Jia Zhangke comments on this scene: "As the camera does a 360-degree panorama, the radio broadcasts a commercial of a villager selling pork, followed by news of the repatriation of Hong Kong. Everything close and everything far away gradually closes in on him; there is no option but to leave."

At this point, Xiao Wu must admit that he belongs to the group of marginalized persons. Compared with other's lives, his life was like secret photography, and it will never be warm or bright. As Jia Zhangke says in reference to his choice to use this kind of filmic style: "I like grey. It represents the color of my hometown, the color of the north of China. Even in spring, it is still different from the colorful south of China. But we live

in this grey hue, it cannot be avoided. This color represents Xiao Wu's life, it is exactly what I want to express."<sup>47</sup>

## 2. The long-take shots

*Within the cinematic apparatus, the crowd becomes not simply the observers of this display of public humiliation and violence, but also the object of the gaze as the camera turns on them.*

—Michael Berry<sup>48</sup>

Jia Zhangke wrote on the Hong Kong publicity poster of *Xiao Wu*: "This is a film in the rough." Jia explained that the decision is an attitude more than an aesthetic expression. He said: "It's not because such living lacks glamor that it can't be faced squarely. The same goes for the characters in the film: I want to convey their humanity in their particular living circumstances. Their existence is unsophisticated—coarse but full of vitality, like weeds along a road."<sup>49</sup> It is for this reason that Jia exclusively uses non-professional actors in *Xiao Wu*. Moreover, he gives a new perspective of looking at the crowd of onlookers. As I mentioned in the first section, because few films were produced in this small town, local bystanders were always curious about the camera. Therefore, a lot of people were around the camera when filming. In contrast to the tactics of the

---

<sup>47</sup> Yang, Danxiu. "Xiao Wu tese jingtou yuyan fenxi" 《小武》特色镜头语言分析 (Analysis of Xiao Wu's unique lens language). *Dianying pingjie*, 2007 (3). p. 37.

<sup>48</sup> Berry, Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy', p.47.

<sup>49</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 105.

director of photography described above (I mentioned in the first section that he used hidden camera techniques to avoid the crowds of people), Jia didn't drive the people away, instead, he used the crowds of onlookers to represent impersonal relationships; as a microcosm of the status of contemporary Chinese society. To capture this sense of alienation from one another, Jia uses a series of long-take shots to film the scene of the crowd of onlookers in a more all-encompassing, realistic way.

The first shot of the crowd of onlookers appears in the first half of the film, as I noted in the above section. The shot begins at 00:07:56 and ends at 00:09:14 and lasts for 78 seconds. This shot starts as Xiao Wu realizes he doesn't have any cigarettes left. He asks one of his partners, San Tu, to steal some money for him to buy the cigarettes. The camera then focuses on San Tu until he meets a journalist and long-take shot ends. It is an ironic moment when the journalist asks San Tu what "strike hard" means as San Tu is literally about to commit a crime. The camera focuses on San Tu's face for more than ten seconds while he remains silent, the lens capturing his overwhelming feelings of nervousness and awkwardness. Then the camera turns to the crowd of onlookers as more and more people begin gathering around, staring at San Tu, creating an atmosphere full of apartness and indicating that human relationships in modern society become estranged, apathetic and tense.

Another long-take shot appears in the middle section of the film. When Xiao Wu stands on the street, people pass by him and no one notices him. He stands there for twenty seconds before an old man passes in front of him riding a tricycle filled with apples. He picks up an apple from the tricycle without the man's noticing. After that, he stands at the same place for another fifty-five seconds holding the apple that he has just

stolen. For the whole seventy-five seconds- apart from the old man coming back to Xiao Wu when he finds his apple has been stolen- everyone else in the scene passes by without a glance. Even when the vendor returns, he just looks at Xiao Wu for a while without a word. There are conclusions about Xiao Wu's life that can be inferred from this long-take shot. First, he is a hobo; he has nothing to do but loiter around. Second, he is an isolated individual; he has no connection with the community. People just ignore him as if they do not see him. Third, his identity is that of a thief. Even standing on the street, he can steal things in front of people. Even though this shot plays out in the middle of the film, it already gives a whole view of the protagonist's living status. When filming this scene, Jia Zhangke use a larger depth of field. The camera is set up across the street from where the scene takes place. It is Jia's intention to create a sense of apathy that can be felt by the audience in the distance that is created between the camera and the characters.

The most famous long-take shot takes place at the end of the film after Xiao Wu gets caught by the police stealing a wallet. At the climax of the story, Xiao Wu is walking through the alley with the police and is then handcuffed to a pole when the policeman has something else to do. At first, Xiao Wu acts fearless. Then he squats down, gazes around and becomes a little anxious. Soon, more and more people gather to surround him and stare at him. The camera focuses in on Xiao Wu's face and rests there for forty-five seconds of film. The changes in his expression accordingly reflect how he is feeling. He begins by squatting down, frowning, sweating and glancing around impatiently. Without a word, the audience can see that these strange eyes watching him from all sides are making him feel nervous, fretful, and even a bit shameful. This scene is in sharp contrast with what people normally think regarding their hometown. People in one's hometown

are often thought of as amiable and kind, willing to offer help. Hometown is typically thought of in terms of love, comfort, and security. Under Jia Zhangke's camera, however, the protagonist's feelings sharply contrast this conventional feeling about hometown. In Xiao Wu's eyes, his hometown is full of unsympathetic people that leave him feeling anxious and hopeless.

In an interview with Michael Berry, Jia Zhangke reflects on this particular scene:

In the original script the ending was supposed to be of the old police officer leading Xiao Wu through the street, eventually disappearing into a crowd. But as I was shooting, I was never really completely satisfied with this original ending. It is a safe ending, but also a rather mediocre one. During the twenty days of the shoot I was constantly trying to come up with a better ending. Suddenly one day when we were shooting a crowd started to gather around to watch us filming and I was struck with a kind of inspiration. I decided to shoot a crowd scene of people staring at him. I felt that in some way, this crowd could serve as a kind of bridge with the audience. Like the audience, the crowd is also spectators, but there is a shift in perspective. As soon as I thought of it I felt a kind of excitement.”<sup>50</sup>

As Jia noted, the following scene reveals a different view—from Xiao Wu's perspective. Jia Zhangke swings the camera around so that the viewers are able to see those bystanders clearly. They are whispering to each other and staring at what they refer to as “you”. This “you” has a double meaning as it could refer to Xiao Wu and also the audience viewing the film. The crowd seems to be staring at the audience through the camera. They have twisted eyes and smiles on their faces as they point through the camera at the viewer. They appear to judge “you” as an audience member as they judge Xiao Wu. The camera brings a sense of reality that “you” cannot escape judgment and

---

<sup>50</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, pp. 46-47.

crowds full of taunting might yet have their sights set upon “you”. Michel Ciment comments on this final scene of the film *Xiao Wu*: “the camera angle changed from 360-degree to Xiao Wu’s perspective, people were looking at Xiao Wu, but actually they are looking at us (the audiences). Jia Zhangke ripped the veil of annoying faces, uncovered the mystery of director’s work, no one can be hiding: power exposed, the audience is exposed too...”<sup>51</sup>

Jia Zhangke himself talks about this last scene: “We were watching the film, the people in the film were watching us.” In *Xiao Wu*, those hometown bystanders have an important performance that represents spectator culture. The culture of spectators has a long history in China. Because of the legal system in Chinese feudal society, the officers always acted selfishly. They did the work that would bring them the most benefit and ignored that which would not. This was such a frequent occurrence that people began to think that even if the legal system cannot do their job why should we care about these things? As a result, when someone needs help, there is no one willing to help them, rather those around them are more inclined to just watch. As time passed, a spectator culture developed.

As the background, people in Lu Xun’s books form an image of cold foolishness. In his story he depicts the famous image of onlooker culture. Michael Berry analyzes this topic in *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy': Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*. He mentions that “The ‘crowd’ of onlookers is a motif that occurs throughout Lu Xun’s fictional universe, staring with the madman in “Diary of a Madman” (“Kuangren riji”), eagerly awaiting the execution in “Medicine”, cheering at the legendary decapitated slide

---

<sup>51</sup> Yu Yi, “Chuanguo wuye zhimen, lun Jia Zhangke: xianshi yizhong” (Through the Midnight Gate, On Jia Zhangke: A kind of Reality), <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/1706961/>

in 'Preface to *Call to Arms*' ('Nahan zixu') or gawking at Ah Q in disappointment when he gets shot instead of being decapitated in 'The True Story of Ah Q'." The same situation occurs in *Xiao Wu*. Jia Zhangke's camera catches this kind of uncaring nature in society. As long as your action does not affect the other's life, the other would always be the spectator or, we say, onlooker, it doesn't matter what you have done to this world. In general, people stand by and watch due to their curiosity as well as social conformity. As a result of curiosity, outsiders who watch a criminal are trying to explore his secret and investigate him. They are interested in what happens to the criminal but often have no consideration as to how he feels. When Xiao Wu is arrested, he watches the news of himself on the television. The journalist interviews several people who discuss their point of view regarding the arrest. One of the interviewees is Xiao Wu's work partner, who is also a pickpocket. He says: "I think a bad guy like him should be arrested!" This scene echoes the spectator culture at the end of the film and emphasizes the uncaring nature of others.

In addition, onlookers keep watching Xiao Wu throughout the film. These people attracted more outsiders into the lens, especially in the small town setting portrayed in this film. This happens in order to show matching attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors conforming to group norms. In the film, there are several scenes which show Xiao Wu either sitting or standing doing nothing for extended periods of time. From the spectators we can see that there are many people who look like Xiao Wu — they have nothing to do but waste their time people-watching. By displaying this spectator culture, Jia Zhangke shows the reality of a small town and the challenges of the residents who face a rapidly developing Chinese economy. Through his use of the hand-held camera and grey imagery,

his illustration of disintegrating relationships and his depiction of spectator culture [voyeur], he displays a bleak view of hometown. Very typically, the director tries to display his protagonist as representative of all marginalized people in this context.

From the three sections, we can draw a conclusion that what is shown in Jia Zhangke's films is different from the normal sense of the hometown. He is trying to use the negative perspective of hometown<sup>52</sup> to represent the changes of his hometown. In his film *Xiao Wu*, Fenyang, is an epitome of China; and Xiao Wu is a typical image of marginalized people. Shot in his hometown, his courage and determination to uncover the social reality in China remains true.

### 3. Aspect Ratio

Jia Zhangke also uses different aspect ratios as a unique technique of his filming. In *Xiao Wu*, he uses the aspect ratio<sup>53</sup> of 4:3, which is the most popular ratio in the 1990s. With the rapid development of digital technology, it constructs a historical challenge to the traditional photography based upon film sensitivity<sup>54</sup>. We could see the changes in Jia Zhangke's later films. In particular, he uses three different aspect ratios in the film *Mountains May Depart*. I will analyze this photographic technique by using *Mountains May Depart* as an example.

---

<sup>52</sup> See page 23 for an explanation of the normal perspective of hometown.

<sup>53</sup> See footnote 10 for an introduction of the aspect ratio.

<sup>54</sup> The traditional way to make a film uses film. The images are based on the film sensitivity. However, this kind of filmmaking has its limitations: the film would be damaged from repeated playings and proper storage was required to maintain the film quality. With the development of digital technology, the tradition films transferred to digital cinema, which is easier to keep, copy and play.

This film has an episodic structure based around the protagonist Tao, whose life is represented in three distinct years: 1999, 2014, and 2025. By using three periods of time, “Jia Zhangke takes a look back, reflects on the present, and anticipates the future of the Chinese society.”<sup>55</sup> With this structure, changes are reflected on each character's life and make an impact on individual feelings. Jia Zhangke uses different aspect ratios to represent the different decades. He discusses this decision in an interview: “At the very beginning, the aspect ratio of the film was a passive decision. In the film, I used the old footage that I filmed in 1999, at that time, the ratio of the film was 4:3 and 16:9, so I shot the first and the second parts of the film in these two ratios. After making this decision, I thought that the aspect ratio of the film actually embodies the history of moving images evolution, so I decided to shoot the last section of the film in a super-wide ratio, which is 2.39:1.”<sup>56</sup>

The first time period depicted was chosen specifically because there was an important factor that was influencing the social reality of the moment. Jia Zhangke said in an interview that: “I always wondered why I set up the start in 1999. Then I suddenly noticed that when I look back at the old material I photographed during the end of 1990s to the beginning of 2000s, I think this was a time that involved a rapid technical development.”<sup>57</sup> From the late 1990s onward, technology was being popularized in China, for example, transport and communication infrastructures were developing at a rapid rate in the form of such things as new highways, the internet, and telephones. These changes

---

<sup>55</sup> Ilpo Hirvonen, *Departing Borders and the Flux of change*. Comments from the website. <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3740778/reviews>.

<sup>56</sup> See the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cA2BRmUdMIg>.

<sup>57</sup> From the interview attached to the DVD Version of *Mountains May Depart*.

in technology influenced a lot for ordinary people's lives, as well as their relationships to one another. To convey this 1999- era feeling to the audience, the first episode is shot in the pillarboxing 4:3 ratio. This aspect ratio's size is similar to the 1990s computer screen's size that makes the audience feel they are going back to that time. The smaller ratio size also looks a little crowded and therefore amplifies the effect of the crowds of people. The audience can see many people in one shot. For example, in the scene of the Spring Festival performance, in the Disco, the characters are all shown together. It reflects that at that time, the relationship between everyone was very close, and the personal feelings are warm, friendly and happy.

In the second episode, Jia Zhangke changes the aspect ratio to the standard 16:9. This is the most popular ratio in contemporary filming. By using this standard, Jia Zhangke pulls the audiences back from the 1990s to the present. Besides this, the wider aspect ratio offers a larger space for containing content. According to Jia Zhangke, this shift is similar to the experience of human existence: "When people are in their middle ages, they bear a broad sense of caring and generosity... I give some words that represent every stage Tao experiences. In her middle age, I use the word 'Ocean.' This is because her life changed from simple to complex, she should hold a lot of memories in her heart. The Ocean indicates that she's full of feelings from her memory." This is why in the second episode, Jia Zhangke chooses wider ratio to represent that characters in their middle ages can be more tolerant; this ratio gives space to each character. It illustrates that their relationships are not as close as they used to be; coldness, strangeness and estrangement take up their lives.

The title *Mountains May Depart* is not shown at the beginning of the film, but is shown at the beginning of the second episode. This gives a hint that starting from the second episode, the departure story will begin. A great shock in Shanxi province government happened suddenly and a lot of officers were investigated, which leads to the breakdown of the coal mining. This result is mirrored in the relationship between the characters. They too have to separate. The distance between them is not only a physical distance but also psychological distance.

The last episode flashes forward eleven years to the year 2025. Jia Zhangke gives the audience his speculations about society in the future. No doubt globalization accelerates the communication between nations; however, the clash between different cultures intensifies. In this episode, Jia Zhangke changes the aspect ratio again to the widescreen format 2.39:1; widescreen film has a width-to-height aspect ratio greater than the standard ratio. It offers better watching experience and higher quality than before. It could be the film ratio of the future. Jia Zhangke uses this kind of ratio to indicate that the time of the third episode is happening in the future. The widescreen also indicates that this is a new era of communication. The increase in international business and in foreign investment has created a need for executives with knowledge of foreign languages and skills in cross-cultural communication. But at the same time, conflicts happen more often. The living status of the first and second-generation immigrants displays a unique group of people. It reveals the dilemma of how to engage in the local culture and how to release the pain of homesickness from the perspectives of the immigrants. They all have their chance to go back to their hometown, but they do not take advantage of the opportunity

to return. The wider ratio makes the relationships among people still more distant, which depicts the characters as even more lonely and helpless.

This chapter mostly reviews Jia Zhangke's film *Xiao Wu*, and mentions another film *Mountains May Depart*. Through the analysis of these two films, we could see some unique photographic techniques that Jia Zhangke uses in his films to represent his intentions. By using these techniques, it not only stamps the films with Jia's style, but also expresses his feelings about hometown, which is the subject of his films, in a deep and complex way.

In addition to employing unique photographic techniques, Jia Zhangke also pays attention to using music in his own way. In my next chapter, I will focus chiefly on the film *Mountains May Depart*, and mention several other films as well, to illustrate the important role popular songs play in Jia Zhangke's film.

## Chapter Two: The pastiche of popular culture in Jia Zhangke's films: pop music in *Mountains May Depart*

*In such a cold and difficult environment [popular culture] provides a place to come home to, it serves as a means of providing self-comfort.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>58</sup>

*Another factor stems from the fact that I was born in 1970, so I was in my formative years in the early 1980s when popular music really began to take root in China. So I really grew up with pop music. Popular music really played an enormous role in the lives of people of my generation as we matured and came of age. At first it was all popular music from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and only later did western music start coming into China. One of the reasons [popular music] was so important was because previous to this China really didn't have any 'popular music' to speak of. The closest thing we had were revolutionary model operas and things made in that mould.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>59</sup>

### Introduction

In most of his films, Jia Zhangke works to describe real lives in Chinese society and focuses on the destiny of the lower class. However, in his latest film, *Mountains May*

---

<sup>58</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p.124.

<sup>59</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p.125.

*Depart* (Shanhe Guren, 2015), he puts the focus on emotional expression. This is a story about time. As times goes by, the film portrays three important stages in one woman's life: in 1999, she is an outgoing girl with hope and expectations; in 2014, she is a business woman with tolerance and calmness; in 2025, she is an older woman with loneliness and memories. The way the main character views the world or thinks about the world changes significantly over time. This film is based on her life stages.

Different from Jia Zhangke's previous works, *Mountains May Depart* has a long timeline. Jia Zhangke says in his interview:

It is the first time that I put my focus on personal emotions. However, I noticed that this individual's feelings are combined with two things: one being the unsettled life, the other being time. First, the past thirty years of reform and opening up were the thirty years that people moved, not only from small town to big city, but also from domestic to abroad. The distance from the path that peoples lives take to their hometown grows and it results in emotion. Second, the story relates to passing time. It is important to me to display that with time that goes by, we will experience a range of personal feelings<sup>60</sup>.

From the interview, we can see that time plays an important role in the film *Mountains May Depart*. As time passes, people move away from their hometown; it is this passing of time that makes people have different personal feelings at different ages. However, one of the most important ideas of this film is, in Jia's words, "mountains may move, those feelings remain". In order to represent feelings, Jia Zhangke uses popular music. He chose two songs: one is the Pet Shop Boys' "Go West" which plays both in the beginning and at the end of the film; the other one is a Chinese song "Farewell" (Zhenzhong, by Ye Qianwen) which is heard in every episode of the film. Through the

---

<sup>60</sup> From the interview attached to the DVD Version of *Mountains May Depart*.

repetition of this particular song at various points in the plot, we witness not just the evolution of the story, but also the suggestion that feelings remain while everything else changes. With the episodic structure, the life of the main character Tao is represented in three distinct years: 1999, 2014, and 2025. Even as the time changes, what is important is that popular songs are repeated to represent eternal feelings.

In this chapter, I will examine how popular music plays an important role in Jia Zhangke's films. This chapter will be divided into two parts. In the first part, I will analyze the different stages and changes in status in the different characters' lives and their personal feelings during the different time periods depicted in *Mountains May Depart* and I analyze how the songs mentioned play an important role in each stage of development. The three sections in my chapter correspond with the three episodes in the film. The film begins in 1999, with rapid technological development. The people are excited and ambitious; the characters experience the most wonderful times in their young age. This celebration of their time in life is set to the soundtrack of cheerful music. It is during this chapter, that they also have their first separation from each other, at which point a key song is heard. The second period comes in 2014. A lot of change has come to Shanxi Province, as well as the lives of the characters. They have grown up to become mature adults and cannot escape experiencing more separations. The key songs have more meaning to each of them during this episode. In the last segment of the film, the future of 2025, the characters experience enormous physical and emotional distances. It is a period displaying interaction between cultures. The characters have very different life experiences but their memories keep their feelings connected to one another.

In the first section, I will describe the unique way in which Jia uses music as narrative by referencing examples in *Mountains May Depart*; in the second section, I will examine music as a symbol of characters and as a symbol of culture, or we could say, as a symbol representing a cultural moment of modernization in China. In this part, I will use Jia Zhangke's other films as examples.

## 1. The Passage of Time

### 1.1 1999: Rapid development in society

*I always wondered why I set up the start in 1999. Then I suddenly noticed that when I look back at the old material I photographed during the end of 1990s to the beginning of 2000s, I think this was a time that involved a rapid technical development.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>61</sup>

*Mountains May Depart* starts with Pet Shop Boys' 1993 version of the Village People's song "Go West". In this episode, the film portrays young people's lives in 1999. What they usually do for entertainment is go to the Disco. "Go West" was the most popular song in the 1990s that played in discos in China. Therefore, it has become a symbol of life in the 1990s. Jia Zhangke used this song to awaken the audiences' memory of that time. What is more, Jia Zhangke also explains that in the name of the song, the word "go" is more important than the word "west". He thinks that in the 1990s, people

---

<sup>61</sup> From the interview MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART -conference- (en) Cannes 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7D02Ptx11o>

considered the action of “going” rather than the destination<sup>62</sup>. It is the time that the government encouraged people to go into business, and set off the ambitions of starting a business. The first period was chosen specifically because of the factors that were influencing social reality in China at the time. From the late 1990s, technology was being popularized in China, for example, the Internet, telephones and so on. These changes in technology had a significant influence on ordinary people's lives, as well as their relationships.

When the song “Go West” is played in the first scene, the characters are all shown together and dancing with the music. It reflects that at that time, the relationship between everyone was very close, and the personal feelings are warm, friendly and happy. This emotion lasts for a while, until the Spring Festival performances end and the first conflict arises between Tao and the two male characters Jinsheng and Liangzi. Both Jinsheng and Liangzi fall in love with Tao, so Tao must choose between two suitors: either the honest but ordinary coal miner Liangzi or the wealthy coal mine owner Jinsheng. The two old friends turn against each other and become competitors. Jia Zhangke mentions this plotline in an interview and explains that he really likes how this situation displays those who are at the same starting line, but who are forced by the social environment to compete with one another<sup>63</sup>. This plotline echoes the story in Jia Zhangke’s earlier film *Xiao Wu*. Both Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong are friends who were thieves; they start out under similar circumstances. But a few years later, Xiao Yong becomes a successful businessman while Xiao Wu remains a thief. The social reality separates them into different life paths: for Xiao Yong, he is surrounded by many friends and is married.

---

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

However, Xiao Wu lives in a lower status, he loses his best friend, his girlfriend, and even the love of his family. In *Mountains May Depart*, Jinsheng, Liangzi and Tao were friends, but Jinsheng is a successful businessman who owns a coal mine. He appears to have great power: he can drive his car to take Tao for a ride; he can spend money to buy a CD from strangers just because Tao said she likes a song on the CD; he can also buy a coal mine and fire Liangzi from his place of work.

Although Jinsheng and Liangzi clearly have a different social status, Tao has similar feelings towards them, which means they are at the same start line with regards to her affections. Jia Zhangke chooses “Farewell” to express their relationship. He felt that Ye Qianwen’s song has a feeling of helping each other when both are in humble circumstances, which is what the film wants to express<sup>64</sup>. This song first appears when a customer tries out a sound system in Tao’s store-- they play this song. Tao loves this song from the first time she hears it. So Jinsheng bought the CD from the customer to make Tao happy. When Jinsheng bought the CD for Tao, it seems that he is not only bringing the CD to Tao, but also bringing a new life to Tao that is deeply connected with this song. After that, Jinsheng asks Tao not to meet with Liangzi again and forces her to choose between him and Liangzi. “Farewell” plays again as Tao chooses Jinsheng and Liangzi decides to leave town. The lyrics appropriately represent the relationship between Tao and Liangzi.

*I cannot lose you  
I hope to get another chance to love you again  
With the same hands that once held each other, and we waved to say goodbye*

---

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

*Even though we are far apart, I will love you with my whole life*<sup>65</sup>.

The farewell in the first episode is from Liangzi, even though it is not an easy decision for him to leave Tao. In the beginning of the film, he still dances with Tao and Jinsheng. But the second dancing scene shows just Tao and Jinsheng dancing together in the Disco--while Liangzi watches them from the side and gets angry. This scene indicates that Liangzi cannot be a part of the group anymore and that the relationship between Tao, Jinsheng and Liangzi is broken. At the end of the first episode, Tao tells Liangzi that she chooses Jinsheng but she still wants to be friends with Liangzi. Liangzi says nothing but goodbye to Tao. After this, Liangzi leaves town. Tao then marries Jinsheng and they have a son named “Dollar” (Daole in Chinese).

Although the farewell from Liangzi gives the film a sad feeling, the first episode still represents the vitality of youth. Jinsheng is successful in his coal career, marries his dream girl and has a son. He names his son “Dollar” because he wants to earn many dollars in the future, which shows he is ambitious. Tao makes a choice she feels is right to marry Jinsheng. She believes Jinsheng’s promise that they will have a better life and keeps hope in that. Even Liangzi, who leaves the town heartbroken, still has the expectation of starting a new life in a new place. Therefore, with the rapid development of the Chinese society in 1999, these young people from a small town were hopeful as they embarked on a new century.

---

<sup>65</sup> Farewell, by Ye Qianwen. Translation by the author. The original text in Chinese as follow: 不肯不可不忍不舍失去你，盼望世事总可有转机；牵手握手分手挥手说再见，纵在两地一生也等你。

## 1.2 2014: The great shock in Shanxi Province

*When people are in middle age, they bear a broad sense of caring and generosity, ..., I give some words that represent every stage Tao experiences. In her middle age, I use the word 'Ocean.' This is because her life changed from simple to complex, she should hold a lot of memories in her heart. The Ocean indicates that she's full of feelings from her memory.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>66</sup>

The second episode fast-forwards fifteen years to 2014. This is a period when coal mining in Shanxi province encountered a record low. In the first quarter of 2014, the profit rate of coal mining was 5.1%<sup>67</sup>. The “black gold” had turned to “potatoes” and the golden decade of coal mining in Shanxi had ended. Additionally, the political situation was no longer stable. An unprecedented and thorough investigation of local officialdom in Shanxi was being undertaken with seven ministerial officers, thirty department officers and three hundred and thirty other officers under investigation. Hit by the double shock of the financial crisis and a political crisis, the coal mining in Shanxi was at an all time low.

The second episode of *Mountains May Depart* starts with this as its stark backdrop. Liangzi returns to his hometown with his wife and their child. Due to long years of hard

---

<sup>66</sup> From the interview MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART -conference- (en) Cannes 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7D02Ptx11o>

<sup>67</sup> Data from website: [http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/201405/20/t20140520\\_2840012.shtml](http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/201405/20/t20140520_2840012.shtml)

labour and mining pollution, he suffers heavily with disease. Working in the decaying coal mining industry, he is desperate and must borrow money for medical treatment. As a forty-year-old woman, Tao is a successful businesswoman who owns a gas station. She is divorced from Jinsheng and remains living in her hometown by herself. Jinsheng has remarried and now lives in Shanghai with their son Daole (Dollar). After coal mining's downfall, Jinsheng decides to move to Australia. Many reunions and farewells alternate throughout the second episode.

Firstly, there is the reunion between Tao and Liangzi. Tao visited Liangzi in order to lend him money. When she arrives at Liangzi's home, everything is the same; even the wedding invitation is still on the bed. However, the youthful boy has turned into a sickly man lying on the bed and the lively girl has turned into a generous woman. When Tao leaves Liangzi's home, it looks like she is saying goodbye to her youthful years.

This reunion is followed by a first farewell. Tao takes her father to the train station so he can attend his friend's birthday party. He dies suddenly never having the chance to say goodbye. Tao sends a text to Jinsheng asking him to send Daole back in order to attend his grandfather's funeral. This results in a second reunion between Daole and Tao. This reunion is different from the one between Liangzi and Tao, which had been warm and close. Tao looks like a stranger to her son Daole. Daole neither understands his mother's sadness nor feels sadness towards his grandfather's death. He calls Tao "Mummy" instead of "Ma", which shows he is not familiar with the environment of his hometown. The only thing that makes him happy is Facetime sessions with his stepmother. From their conversations, Tao discovers that Jinsheng plans to move to Australia, which then leads to another farewell between Tao and Daole.

After her farewell with Liangzi which is a simple “goodbye” and the farewell without any goodbye from her father, Tao wants to make a fair leave-taking with Daole. She picks the slowest train in order to extend her time with her son. On the train, she listens to the song “Farewell” with Daole. The lyrics appropriately represent Tao’s feeling again.

At the end, Tao gives a key to Daole and says: “This is the key for your home, you should have one. You can come back whenever you want.”<sup>68</sup> In this episode, we see that the camera always gives space to each character. Different from the groups of people dancing or doing something together in the first episode, it is rare to see a crowd of people in one scene in this episode. It may illustrate that their relationship is not as close as it used to be; coldness, strangeness and estrangement consumes their lives.

The title *Mountains May Depart* is not shown at the beginning of the film, but is shown at the beginning of the second episode. This suggests that starting from the second episode, the departure story will begin. As a result, the audience sees many farewells in this section: Liangzi suffers disease (which could represent a farewell to the good memories); Tao gets divorced and is separated from her son by a long distance; Tao also loses her father suddenly; Jinsheng is not able to continue his career in China and has to move abroad. The great shock in Shanxi province leads to the breakdown of coal mining. The impact of this is mirrored in the relationships between the characters; they must separate. The distance between them is not only a physical distance but also a psychological distance.

---

<sup>68</sup> *Mountains May Depart*, Jia Zhangke, 2015.

### 1.3 2025 : The home and the hometown

The last episode flashes forward another eleven years to the year 2025. Jia Zhangke gives the audience his speculations about society in the future. No doubt globalization accelerates the communication between nations; however, the clash of different cultures increases. Most of the third episode is photographed in Australia, and shows Jinsheng and Daole as first-generation immigrants with Jinsheng struggling to adapt to the new culture and Daole struggling to stay connected to his Chinese roots.

As a college student, Daole lives in Australia with Jinsheng. Most of the memories from China are gone, even his native language, Chinese. He communicates with his father using Google translator and this language barrier aggravates their relationship. Tao is not shown in this episode. Instead, another female character Mia appears. She is Daole's Chinese teacher and seems to be around the same age as his mother, Tao. Many similarities make Daole feel a maternal love toward Mia and he develops a relationship with her.

Daole is representative of most second-generation immigrants. A lost sense of belonging, a vague memory of his hometown, and feelings of alienation from his parents all lead to a difficult situation in his growth. First-generation immigrants, which are usually the parents, choose to emigrate to provide their children with a better environment to grow up in but the transition is often not an easy one and the shift between cultures has a greater psychological impact than anticipated.

For first-generation immigrants, language is the first challenge. Jinsheng is no exception. He cannot communicate with people without Google translator. His groups of friends are mostly his own countrymen that have moved abroad at a similar time for a

similar reason. They sit together to talk about the things or people in their hometown. Even though they are now far away from there, they still could remember it concretely in their minds. However, they cannot go back even though they miss their hometown.

Homesickness becomes their main emotion. This is seen especially with Jinsheng in the following ways: First, when the character Jinsheng first appears in the film, he wears fashionable clothes; however, he wears homespun suits in Australia which make him look folksy instead of like a businessman. Second, in the film, the Yellow River is a symbol of their hometown, Shanxi. It appears in every episode. In 1999, it is where Tao, Jinsheng and Liangzi play together for the last time; in 2014, it is where Tao has to say goodbye to her son and send him away; and in 2025, it is portrayed in the painting that hangs on the wall in Jinsheng's home in Australia. His hometown, where he will never return, is only present in his mind. Third, in Jinsheng's home in Australia, there is a bottle of wine called "Fenjiu" (汾酒). It is one of the four most popular kinds of wine produced in Shanxi, Fenyang. Even though Jinsheng is in Australia, he still drinks the wine from his hometown.

Daole's teacher Mia experiences similar feelings. Even though she does not have difficulty with communicating, she still cannot go back to the past. When Daole asks her what her Chinese name is, she says: "I forget." Mia is lying because she doesn't want to talk about her previous life. It has become an eternal memory, one that cannot be forgotten but that also cannot be returned to or truthfully recalled. The transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from the UK to PRC took place in 1997. There was a social trend among Hong Kong residents to move abroad to avoid 1997. Mia was one of them and when she first left Hong Kong, she moved to Toronto. Lacking both love and family,

she lives with pain and loneliness. When Mia plays a Chinese song in the class, she chooses “Farewell” again.

*Suddenly there's a silence in the air,  
I stopped on my way, couldn't help myself to look at you again  
My eyes moist, and on the verge of tear  
My heart was full of attachment and sadness  
I don't know how to start since I have so many things that I want to tell you*

*No matter where are you, I care about you  
The longest night stays with me when I am missing you  
It is getting cold in the distance  
And may now later  
If I could have a choice of not separating with you<sup>69</sup>*

The song stimulates Daole's own memories and he is reminded that he is familiar with the song. It also brings up Mia's memories about her hometown (she's from Hong Kong and speaks Cantonese). At the end of the film, Daole calls his mother's name, Tao, and then the camera goes back to Shanxi. Tao seems to hear her son calling. At the same time, she is missing her son, too. She makes the “wheatear” shape dumpling for Daole. After that she walks out of her home and comes to the snow-land and begins to dance. The background music “Go West” plays, and Tao dances with it, just like she did with Jinsheng and Liangzi when they were young. The difference is that this time she dances alone. However, after all the farewells, she gets a reunion with her younger self.

The last episode turns to a new era. The increase in international business and in foreign investment has created a need for executives with knowledge of foreign

---

<sup>69</sup> Farewell, by Ye Qianwen. Translation by the author. The original text in Chinese as follow: 突然地沉默了的空气，停在途上令人又再回望你。沾湿双眼渐红，难藏依恋及痛悲，多年情不知怎说起；在何地仍然是关心你，无尽长夜为陪伴我怀念你。它方天气渐凉，前途或有白雪飞，假如能不想别离你。

languages and skills in cross-cultural communication. The living status of the first and second generation immigrants displays a unique group of people. This episode reveals the dilemma of how to engage in the local culture and how to release the pain of homesickness from the perspectives of Daole, Jinsheng, and Mia. They all have their chance to go back to their hometown, but they did not act. When Jinsheng's friend asks him to go back to Shanxi, he says: "we will talk about it later." Daole asks Mia: "Why don't you just go back to Toronto?" She does not even respond. Even though Daole wears the key his mother gave him at all times, he never goes back. They all know that even if they do go back, time has changed, and the hometown will never be the one that lives in their memories.

All of Jia Zhangke's films are more or less about change. *Mountains May Depart* is no exception. If we divide the Chinese title into two parts, "Shanhe" (mountains and rivers) and "Guren" (old friends), we will find that "Shanhe" remains, but "Guren" has gone. Mountains and rivers represent time and space. Time is from 1999 to 2014, then to 2025. Space is from Shanxi to Shanghai, then to Australia. The river refers to the Yellow River, as it appears in each of the three episodes. First, Tao, Jinsheng and Liangzi set off a firework on the river. They stand in a triangle formation. The triangle is the most stable shape but when the triangle is the shape of a relationship, it becomes most unstable. Second, the river is shown in 2014, when Tao walks over the bridge with her son, and the river is like a barrier between them. The last time, the river is shown in the painting that hangs on the wall in Australia, representing the idea that the past will always remain in memory.

Old friends represent deep-rooted relationships and feelings. Jia Zhangke uses a few details to reveal the future departure of the characters. First, when Tao marries Jinsheng, they took wedding photos in front of a painting. This painting is of the Sydney Opera House. Fifteen years later, Jinsheng moves to Australia but Tao stays in Shanxi. Second, Jinsheng and Tao have a puppy in 1999 and Tao says its life will last about fifteen years. Jinsheng says: “that’s 2014! We will both be in our forties!” However, later we see the dog is still alive and stays with Tao in 2014, but Jinsheng has gone. Third, the day Tao sends her wedding invitation to Liangzi, Liangzi decides to leave town. Fifteen years later when Liangzi comes back, the wedding invitation is still there. But Tao is divorced from Jinsheng. Tao puts the invitation in her bag as if she had never sent it. At last, in 1999, Jinsheng wants to buy a gun to kill Liangzi. However, in 2025, he has several guns, but he cannot find an “enemy” anymore. These plotlines perfectly explain the title: mountains and rivers remain, but old friends have gone.

*Mountains May Depart* examines contemporary Chinese society and focuses on people’s living status. However, it makes a transition from the perspective of spectators within society to the perspective of individuals within society and shifts the emphasis to exploring personal feelings. Jia Zhangke explores a group of people and their emotional changes as they benefit from the development of society and, at the same time, reveals the ways in which their struggle for material wealth leads to emotional poverty.

## 2. The Sublime Power of Popular Music in Other Ways

### 2.1 A communication between characters

*In the years preceding the shooting of Xiao Wu, karaoke became extremely popular in China. I went with a bunch of friends to a karaoke club in my hometown where we saw a guy all alone who kept singing the same songs over and over again. His voice was really terrible and at first I found him annoying but as time went by and I watched him sing I suddenly found myself quite moved. That experience really made me look at popular culture in a new light.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>70</sup>

As I noted at the beginning of this chapter, Jia Zhangke uses popular music as a way of expressing feelings. Especially in *Xiao Wu*, it becomes a form of communication between the characters. The second part of the film depicts Xiao Wu's love life. To try to heal the loss of his friendship with Xiao Yong, Xiao Wu goes to a karaoke bar and meets a girl there named Meimei. This relationship develops alongside the songs that are introduced in the film. The first time Xiao Wu meets Meimei, she is singing a song called "Beautiful Girls." This is a song that is popular in the countryside of China and it reflects Meimei's identity as a country folk. The second song is "Rain in the Heart", which is the same song that someone sings at Xiao Yong's wedding. When Meimei invites Xiao Wu to sing with her, Xiao Wu refuses. This reflects the painful memories he holds of his broken friendship with Xiao Yong.

The relationship between Xiao Wu and Meimei develops rapidly over a few days. Xiao Wu goes to Meimei's home to see her when she is ill and he brings a hot water bottle for her. As she works in a town that is far away from where she lives, Meimei feels

---

<sup>70</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p. 124.

warmth and love from this gesture. In Meimei's room, she sings a song called "Sky" by Wang Fei for Xiao Wu. When she asks Xiao Wu to sing a song for her in response, Xiao Wu refuses, and pulls out the lighter to play its music instead of singing himself. With the music playing, they embrace each other. The first time Xiao Wu takes Meimei out, he has no idea where they should go, as all they had done previously was hang out informally. As the relationship with Meimei develops, Xiao Wu tries to change himself to win her heart. In a very important scene, Xiao Wu goes to a bathhouse, where he slowly walks naked in front of the camera into a pool. During the bath, he finally sings the song "Rain in the Heart." This scene is a ceremony of rebirth, which represents Xiao Wu opening his mind and recreating himself. He is transforming from his old self into a new image. After that, Xiao Wu attends some parties with friends and the audience sees him laugh in front of the camera for the first time. After all of his efforts have failed, he finally opens his mind to accept himself. In the relationship between Xiao Wu and MeiMei, most of their activities are related to songs. Music becomes the most important way that they communicate with one another.

## 2.2 A symbol of culture

*Then there was the sudden development of countless karaoke clubs and karaoke girls--- who were basically prostitutes---all of this became so commonplace. ... All of this radical change playing out right there before my eyes left me with a pressing urge to shoot it and capture it before it was gone.*

It is very common to see karaoke clubs in Jia Zhangke's films, especially in his early films. As Jia explains, these places become a symbol of culture: "karaoke culture itself, are specific signs of Chinese society in transition. Karaoke culture reveals a great deal about overall contemporary Chinese society, history, and culture."<sup>72</sup> As a result, Jia always picks popular songs from the time portrayed and even uses song titles as titles for his films. For example, "Platform" is a rock song that was famous in the mid-1980s. The film takes place between the late-1970s and the early 1980s. This is a period when China was experiencing revolutionary change. People were excited and expected to step into a new era. Jia uses this song as the film's title not only because it recalls the memories of the 1980s but also as "a tribute to people's naïve expectations"<sup>73</sup>. What's more, Jia Zhangke includes many other popular songs in this particular film. He discusses his reasons for doing so in an interview:

This is especially evident in *Platform* where I tried to consciously inject all the music that moved me over the years into the film. So there is a historicity immediately built into the narrative through the music. There are also several specific songs that really represent what the Chinese people were going through during a given historical frame.<sup>74</sup>

---

<sup>71</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p. 128.

<sup>72</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 111.

<sup>73</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 43.

<sup>74</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, pp. 125-126.

Another example is *Unknown Pleasures*. It takes the title from a song by Richie Jen, a popular singer from Taiwan. This song is played three times in the film and each time it represents a different situation. Michael Berry discusses this in his book, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy': Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*, and explains that it not only shows “the evolution of the story, but also the transformation of song itself, as it is repeatedly remade.”<sup>75</sup> From this we could see that popular songs have important roles in Jia Zhangke’s films.

### 2.3 A representative of the character

Instead of a symbol of culture, popular songs sometimes play the role of character representatives. The songs are chosen to fit with a specific situation and the lyrics describe what the characters want to say in that moment. In *A Touch of Sin*, Jia Zhangke uses music in this way.

In the fourth story of *A Touch of Sin*, the character Xiao Hui is a migrant worker. At first, he works in a factory. His colleague gets injured at work and the boss tells Xiao Hui that he should take part of the responsibility. Xiao Hui thinks that this is unfair so he quits his job and goes to Dong Guan<sup>76</sup>. When he gets there, nothing has changed. He is still a worker from the underclass and still doesn’t have control over his own life. His status is like his online name: I am just a little bird. “Little Bird” is a song title with the following lyrics:

*Sometimes I think I’m like a tiny bird,*

---

<sup>75</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, p. 107.

<sup>76</sup> A town in Guangdong province.

*Who wants to fly, but can never fly high.  
 Maybe one day I will perch on a branch, but become a hunter's target  
 Then I flew into the clear sky only to realize that I was left to myself<sup>77</sup>*

This is exactly what Xiao Hui's life is like. He wants to earn more money and he wants to have his love. But reality for him is always so cruel. There is extreme pressure on him from his mother who treats him as a tool for earning money and from a society that treats him like forced labor. After he goes to Dong Guan, he meets a girl named Lian Rong and he falls in love with her. However, Lian Rong has a three-year-old daughter so she must work as a prostitute to make ends meet. Xiao Hui asks her to go away with him but Lian Rong refuses. He finds himself feeling hopeless and in the end he commits suicide. Xiao Hui is like a bird that was left to itself; he doesn't have any support to rely on. He tries hard to improve his living status but he fails again and again. Every time he tries to better his life, he is struck down. Jia uses the lyrics to "Little Bird" to accurately describe Xiao Hui's life.

This chapter is a review of how music is used in Jia Zhangke's films and gives a summary of the classification of the features of the songs played. In *Mountains May Depart*, and the other films mentioned, popular songs become a unique technique for depicting the characters' relationships with one another, their emotional nature and their living status. Music has the ability to strike a chord in everyone's hearts and Jia uses music that the audience can identify with their own lives. In next chapter, I will analyze another important feature of Jia Zhangke's film style; the use of metaphor.

---

<sup>77</sup> I am just a little bird, by Zhao Chuan. Translation from the Internet.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkl\\_7XslVf4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkl_7XslVf4) The original text in Chinese as follow: 有时候我觉得自己像一只小小鸟，想要飞却怎么样也飞不高。也许有一天我栖上了枝头，却成为猎人的目标。我飞上了青天才发现自己从此无依无靠。

### Chapter Three: Jia Zhangke's unique narrative style : images and metaphors in *A Touch of Sin*

*For me, all realist techniques serve to convey my perceived experiences of the real world. We almost have no way of approaching reality in itself, and in any case, the purpose of cinema is not simply to reach some standard of truth. I pursue a sense of the real in cinema more than I pursue reality itself, because I think that the sense of the real is aesthetic, whereas reality itself is the domain of sociology and sciences. Likewise, in my films, social issues are experienced as individual existential crises. After all, I am a filmmaker and not a sociologist.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>78</sup>

*I'm often told that my essay [feature] films are like documentaries and vice versa. When I shoot fiction, I usually want to maintain a certain objectivity in presenting the characters in their settings. But when I shoot documentary, I want to capture the drama that's inherent in reality, and I want to faithfully express my subjective impressions.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>79</sup>

#### Introduction

As a representative of the Sixth Generation directors, Jia Zhangke insists on showing “a sense of the real” to uncover real experiences in Chinese society, especially the life

---

<sup>78</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 146.

<sup>79</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 250.

experiences of people in the lower class. In Jia's films, he uses his camera to record life in the small towns and show these vulnerable groups of people as they struggle through the process of China's modernization. This has become a main feature of Jia Zhangke's film style. He also uses unique cinematography techniques and incorporates elements of popular culture to build the narrative structure of his films. In this chapter, I will show how Jia uses a highly original system of metaphorical images, both sound and visual, to build a surreal world that is based on reality.

*A Touch of Sin* (Tianzhuding, 2013) is structured around four real news events that happened in China. These events are: Hu Wenhai shooting village officials and claiming the officials infringed upon his interests; Zhou Kehua being involved in at least nine murder and robbery cases in different provinces; Deng Yujiao killing an officer who had come to the hotel seeking sexual services; and, Foxconn employees threatening to commit mass-suicide in protest of their working conditions. Besides these notable events, the film also contains several social issues such as the Wenzhou train collision, Dongguan as China's sex capital, and government corruption, to name a few. By depicting these events, Jia Zhangke exposes the hottest social issues in society and shows a view of people's everyday life. He creates four stories based on the four real events in *A Touch of Sin*: The first story tells that Da Hai is a villager who claims himself as a victim in the system of corruption. After he fails to fight with the local boss and other village leaders, he kills a few officers and villagers as a revenge. The second story depicts a character San Er, who travels around the country to rob and kill people. To escape from the constraints of family and relationships, shooting guns is the only thing that he doesn't feel boring. The third story begins with a woman named Xiao Yu meets with her lover,

who already has a family. Xiao Yu works at a sauna bath center. One day, two officers come to ask Xiao Yu to offer them her sexual services. She refuses but they won't stop. At last, Xiao Yu kills one of them. The last story is about a migrant worker Xiao Hui. He is a worker in a factory and lives very poor. However, his mother treats him as a tool for making money. After a colleague got hurt caused by his fault, he escapes to Dongguan. He meets a girl named Lian Rong at there, but Lian Rong refuses to have a relationship with him. Under various pressures, he chooses to end his life by jumping from a dormitory.

Jia Zhangke's other films are like documentaries in the way they are filmed and the way the characters are depicted but *A Touch of Sin* is different. As I noted above, there is no clear boundary between feature film and documentary in Jia Zhangke's work. Although this film is based on real news events, it is the first time that Jia focuses more on the stories themselves than the images of characters. Colorful shots, detailed plots, and a variety of metaphors make this film a transformation from his previous work.

For the cinematography, he abandons the hand-held camera and uses other filming techniques, for example, Steadicam photography. Steadicam is a brand of camera stabilizer mount for motion picture cameras that mechanically isolates it from the operator's movement. It allows for a smooth shot, even when moving quickly over an uneven surface. Jia Zhangke said in an interview: "Although *A Touch of Sin* is based on some news events, I am still trying to represent the expressions of abstract aspects by using my imagination. The reason that I use Steadicam photography is because I am trying to give the film a feeling of mysterious movement."<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Tony Rayns, The old and the new, *Sight&Sound*, June 2014. <http://cinophilia.net/28556>

In *A Touch of Sin*, Jia uses various kinds of metaphors to express abstract concepts and display “real” society. In this chapter, I will analyze three kinds of metaphors represented in this film. The first section examines metaphors from literature and film; the second section analyzes animal metaphors; and the final section focuses on the use of recurring metaphors in Jia Zhangke’s films.

### 1. The Intertextuality Between Literature and Film

*I discovered that when I was giving talks in Europe. Once, after viewing Xiao Wu, someone in the audience asked me, “whose films do you like?” I answered, there’s Bresson and De Sica. That’s when I became aware that, between their film methods and my creation, there might very well be some underlying connection.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>81</sup>

*Maybe my aesthetic preference comes mainly from my experience of reading Borges’s novels [fictions]. Of course, I’ve read him in Chinese translation, and I can’t judge his original style. In the translated works, I encountered a series of concrete images unadorned by rhetorical flourishes. Borges uses such concision to construct a perplexing imaginary world. This is precisely what I want to accomplish when I make a film. For example, in Xiao Wu, after the sequence where Meimei kisses Xiao Wu, music from John Woo’s The Killer is heard off-screen. It creates that distancing effect that allows us to oscillate freely between the two planes of reality and non-reality.*

---

<sup>81</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 116.

Jia Zhangke explains that sometimes the intertextuality between literature and film shows in his works as spontaneous and unconscious. As Jia Zhangke notes, there is also a connection between his films and other films that influence his creation. As a good example, *A Touch of Sin* is a film influenced by both modern Chinese literature and Wuxia films. Michael Berry analyzes this topic in the second chapter of his book *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy': Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*. Berry notes that Lu Xun's "The True Story of Ah Q" is the true text of the film *Xiao Wu*. He asserts that the character Xiao Wu is a depiction of the image of Ah Q. Ah Q is a representative of "The Spiritual Victory", which is used commonly as a term of mockery to describe someone who chooses not to face up to reality and deceives himself into believing he is successful, or has unjustified beliefs of superiority over others. It describes a narcissistic individual who rationalizes every single actual failure he faces as a psychological triumph. Berry argued that this image could be seen throughout the film *Xiao Wu*. For example, when Xiao Wu is boarding a bus, he smiles when he succeeds at avoiding paying for the ticket. Or when he has nothing to do, he interrupts others to cause offense<sup>83</sup>. As an important figure in modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun produced harsh criticism of social problems in China, particularly in his analysis of the "Chinese national character". He created a series of cultural images to criticize Chinese national character and the shortcomings of traditional culture. Michael points out that Jia inherited this "national

---

<sup>82</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 118.

<sup>83</sup> Berry, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, pp. 39-45.

character criticism” from Lu Xun. This is true because in an interview, Jia Zhangke said: “I really like what Liu Heng<sup>84</sup> said when he expressed his view on Lu Xun, ‘The boundless gloom in Lu Xun’s essays brightens up our own darkness.’”<sup>85</sup> Although most of Jia Zhangke’s films aim to portray the dark side of society, he does this to try to motivate the audience to face reality. I believe that, we can see the important influence of Lu Xun in Jia’s films, not only *Xiao Wu*, but also *A Touch of Sin*.

When watching the first story in *A Touch of Sin*, the image of Da Hai makes the audiences recall a character named Xia Yu in Lu Xun’s work “Medicine”<sup>86</sup>. What happens to Jia’s character Da Hai is very similar. Da Hai is a villager living in a small town. A person from the same village becomes a successful businessman because of the coal mine. Da Hai is the only person who opposes the village chief and the coal mine owner’s corruption. When Da Hai is trying to persuade others to realize the truth, people choose to mock him or just ignore him. There are three plots mentioned in this situation. First, Da Hai talks to two workers and explains the village chief’s Audi A6 belongs to everyone in the village, because “he sold the state-owned coal mine so he could afford it.” But the workers just sneer at him: “A pity you weren’t born earlier, or you could be a general.” The comment implies that the workers don’t agree with Da Hai and that they think his ideas are old fashioned and out of touch with today’s society. As lower class workers, they choose concession rather than revolution. Second, Da Hai goes to the post office and tells a man that he is writing to the Discipline Commission to complain about

---

<sup>84</sup> A realist writer from China.

<sup>85</sup> Jia, *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 303.

<sup>86</sup> Xia Yu is a revolutionary soldier who was arrested and killed by the government. When he was in prison, he claimed that the Qing Dynasty belonged to everyone and he was trying to persuade the others prisoners to attend the revolution, but no one listened to him.

the chief and the coal mine owner Jiao Shengli. This man does not say anything and simply smiles, which indicates that he thinks that Da Hai's action is stupid. Third, Da Hai is having an argument on a bus with an accountant about the benefits from the coal mine that the villagers should receive. Meanwhile, the other passengers just keep silent. When Da Hai tries to talk with one of the passengers, he refuses and says: "I don't want to listen to you." And finally, the villagers go to the airport to greet Boss Jiao and Da Hai asks Jiao to discuss the village's economy in front of all the villagers. While this is happening the other villagers walk by and leave Da Hai alone. No one cares what Da Hai is doing. From these specific plot points, we can see that in Da Hai's village, the people are numb and apathetic. Da Hai is the first one to break the rules and speak out. His image is reminiscent of a revolutionary soldier, like Xia Yu. But in the end Da Hai, like the revolutionary soldier Xia Yu, fails in his quest. Lu Xun's story "Medicine" indicates that it is not good timing to revolt when the people are still ignorant, numb and unconscious. By creating the character Da Hai, Jia Zhangke is trying to point out that these villagers do not have a consciousness of resistance, rather, as Lu Xun defined it, they have the "Chinese national character". This scene plays out everywhere in China, however, people like Da Hai and Xia Yu are too weak to change the situation.

The second example of intertextuality in *A Touch of Sin* is reflected with the films of Wuxia. Jia Zhangke has said that when he was young, he would spend a lot of time in the video hall watching Wuxia films<sup>87</sup>. The English name of the film is translated as *A Touch of Sin*, which mirrors a Wuxia film title *A Touch of Zen* (Xianü, dir. King Hu, 1971). Jia Zhangke has commented that *A Touch of Sin* is a modern version of a Wuxia film. Both

---

<sup>87</sup> See Mao Jian, People who were knocked down (Bei Zhuangdao de Ren),

<https://www.douban.com/group/topic/50232092/>

of these films portray how significant social change impacts the people. However, the characters in Jia's film differ from the swordsmen represented in Wuxia films. Jia refers to his own characters as "disabled swordsman." This is because the swordsmen in Wuxia films are imaginary and they have super powers they use to defend against injustice. Whereas in Jia's film, the swordsmen are not strong characters; the only thing they can do is try to defend their dignity, and they will even lose that eventually.

The first image of a "disabled swordsman" is Da Hai. When the village chief and the boss Jiao Shengli expropriate the villagers' benefits, Da Hai stands up to defend the villager's rights. But his actions are ignored by the villagers and he is viewed as an odd person. Therefore, Da Hai chooses a simple way to solve this issue: violence. When he visits the accountant's home with a gun, he saw the opera stage is playing Lin Chong's *Night Journey*<sup>88</sup> on his way. As a famous figure in *The Water Margin*, Lin Chong's story is a tragedy. His wife commits suicide because she has been forced to marry an official's son. To avoid the official's persecution, Lin Chong has no choice but to go to Liangshan and kill bad people. This song always plays at the beginning of death scenes. In *A Touch of Sin*, the song is also used to indicate the coming of violence. This is one example of Jia's use of intertextuality with other films.

Jia also uses visual clues to emphasize Da Hai association with the "disabled swordsman". For example, Da Hai wraps his gun in a piece of cloth that bares a picture of Wu Song slaying the tiger with his bare hands, which also represents violence. Both of these are noteworthy as they signify that Da Hai's experience is similar to Lin Chong and

---

<sup>88</sup> Lin Chong Yeben (Lin Chong on the run), an opera based on the story of Lin Chong, which played during the last part of episode 7 of *the Water Margin* (1998) and some death scenes.

Wu Song, as all of them are forced into rebellion. At first, they choose to tolerate the injustice peacefully; like Lin Chong enduring bullying by officials, Da Hai to attempts to deal with these injustices in a peaceful way by writing a letter of complaint. In the end, Lin Chong kills Wang Lun and Da Hai kills Jiao Shengli. When law and order are broken, the only thing that one can rely on is violence.

The second “disabled swordsman” is Xiao Yu. This character’s image reflects both female characters in Wuxia films, and is similar to a character in *A Touch of Zen*. Jia Zhangke uses chivalric elements in building the character of Xiao Yu. For example, Xiao Yu’s haircut is similar to the image of a chivalrous swords-woman. Her boots resemble a rider’s boots. What is more, at first, Xiao Yu is a victim but she bursts through with a sudden transformation to become a fighter. The most important thing is that she fights for justice and fairness which is the same goal as the chivalrous swords-woman. When she gashes the officer’s chest, her gesture of holding a knife is like a swords-woman. After she gets injured, the officer is planning to leap at her, but Xiao Yu shouts “ha!”<sup>89</sup> and inserts the knife into his stomach. This is the same as the swords-woman’s action. Then, she holds the bloody knife and comes out from the room, making every step deliberate. In doing so, she resembles a swords-woman who is performing a task. After that, she cuts her hair which indicates that she has been released from prison. When she walks in the street of Shanxi, the dusty wind blows hard, turning the sky yellow. Her head is covered in scarves, and here she looks like a swords-woman walking in the desert.

Two other characters also have some features reminiscent of the swordsman. When San Er kills people, he is cool and calm. However, he reflects two features of a traditional

---

<sup>89</sup> A sound that shouted when the swordsman fighting.

swordsman: filial piety and being a caring father. He crosses thousands of miles to attend his mother's birthday party, even though the party was just a ceremony for receiving the red packet<sup>90</sup>. When his big brother gives San Er a share of the gift money, he refuses and gives it to his mother. When San Er is with his son, he is a loving father. He hoists his son onto his shoulders. When the children set off fireworks, his son stands alone and feels upset, so he sets off a firecracker by using the gun. San Er's fate is like this firework, brilliant and glorious, but will diminish.

The character Xiao Hui is similar. As a character, he represents the people that live on the fringes of urban centres (or in the countryside). From his mother's perspective, he is a tool for earning money; but, from the city people's perspective, he is just a laborer who works in the city. With the heavy economic pressure, Xiao Hui lives as laboring people did under the heavy tax in ancient China. His tragic fate is foreshadowed at the beginning of the film. As Da Hai writes his litigation letter, *The One-Armed Swordsman* (dir. Zhang Che, 1967) is playing on the television. There is a line heard which says: "You should pay me with two arms, but you only have one, so you have to pay for that with your life!" This scene is part of the intertextuality as well since it has a connection to the story of Xiao Hui. What is waiting for him is the debt he will never pay off. At the end, Xiao Hui pays for that with his young life. This connection appears a lot of times in Jia Zhangke's films and has become one of his unique expressions of narrative.

## 2. Animal Metaphors

---

<sup>90</sup> In Chinese and other East Asian and Southeast Asian societies, a red packet is a monetary gift which is given during holidays or special occasions such as weddings, Spring Festivals or the birth of a baby.

*As for animals, I think we should always see things through their perspective and realize how selfish we sometimes are. It provides an important and different angle to look at human beings.*

—Jia Zhangke<sup>91</sup>

In *A Touch of Sin*, there is a scene in the third story when the character Xiao Yu is watching a television program called *Legend of Nature*<sup>92</sup>. Xiao Yu asks her partner, “Did you know animals commit suicide?” Her partner says, “So they don’t know the saying: better to live miserable than die happy?” This conversation highlights the main subject of the film which is the choice of live miserable or die happy. All of the film characters belong to the lowest class of society. Their lives are hopeless. As the saying goes, they choose to live miserably rather than die. However, when they cannot stand it anymore, they select a way different from the animals, that is stronger than suicide—violence. With this, Jia Zhangke implies that the different images of animals shown in the film have connections with the characters.

First, in Da Hai’s story, after several attempts failed, he also confronts the boss Jiao, but in doing so, he gets beaten. When Da Hai is in the hospital, Jiao Shengli's assistant brings some money to Da Hai and acts like all Da Hai wants is money. This makes Da Hai feel humiliated. At this point, Da Hai becomes extremely upset and he decides to take revenge. When he takes out his gun, there is a picture of a tiger (Menghu Xiashan

---

<sup>91</sup> Jia Zhangke in London: Q&As at the BFI. A Transcript is available on

<http://www.easternkicks.com/news/jia-zhangke-in-london-qas-at-the-bfi-and-kings-college>

<sup>92</sup> A documentary about animals provided by CCTV-10, a science and education focused channel of the China Central Television.

Tu<sup>93</sup>) reflected in the mirror. This symbolizes that Da Hai has transformed into an angry tiger. The image of the tiger has been shown a few times before, such as when Da Hai did insulin injections, or when he wrote to the Discipline Commission. At these times the tiger indicates that although Da Hai is suffering poverty and injustice, he is a man that can attack like a tiger. At the end of this story within the film, when he is on his way to the accountant's home, he uses a piece of cloth to cover the gun. The tiger is printed on that cloth. That shows that this angry man is compelled to do something to fight against the oppression.

After he kills the village chief, Da Hai sees a villager beating a horse. This is the second image of an animal in the film. The villager beats the horse for 17 seconds while repeating the word "Giddy-Up!" Because the horse is chained and it can do nothing but take the beating. The image of the horse represents that of the people in the village who can do nothing to control their fate; they are controlled and cannot escape. They have become used to bearing the injustice and have become too numb to express their anger. Additionally, the image of this villager who beats the horse represents the leaders or bosses. This villager is forcefully asking the horse to go, and if it does not obey him, he beats it. This is the same as the village chief and the boss as all they want is to squeeze profits out of the workers and they do not care about the people. When people like Da Hai do not obey them, they will use violence in response. In the end, Da Hai kills this villager, which shows the anger he has for the people who treat him as this villager treats the horse.

---

<sup>93</sup> A phrase that describes the power of a tiger when it is coming down a hill. It is the subject of a painting that illustrates how brave and ferocious the tiger is.

In the second story, the character of San Er is a cold and heartless killer. When he kills people, he has clear targets, expert marksmanship and completes his goals. There is no chance to challenge him at all. When San Er returns to his hometown to celebrate his mother's birthday, he walks in the street and sees a girl who is hugging a duck with her father sitting behind her holding a knife and preparing to kill it. The image of the duck represents the victims that are killed by San Er. They had also been targets at first, just like the duck who cannot escape its death. The next time San Er sees the duck, it was being killed by the man. The man cut the duck's throat to let the duck bleed. The duck struggled for a while before it finally dies. San Er killing people is like this man who kills the duck, without hesitation or emotion. But when his wife asks him to stop killing people, he says: "Remaining a villager is boring, but shooting guns isn't boring." He has a thoughtful and intelligent mind and he cannot integrate into life in the countryside.

The biggest difference between humans and animals is that a human can control their thoughts and actions but most animals are guided by their instinct and act in order to survive. However, when people are under extreme and brutal oppression, their morals and sense of legality disappear. They become alienated. San Er is an example of this. At the beginning, he feels a special feeling from killing people that he has never felt before and he becomes addicted to it. When he repeats this action, he becomes just a tool for killing. During this progress, San Er loses his human nature. At the end of this story within the film, he follows a truck that is full of cows waiting to be killed. The cows are in a similar situation to that which San Er finds himself. On the hat he is wearing there is also the image of a cow. The cows represent San Er, because even if he is strong, he cannot escape his fate of being captured and killed.

The third story begins with the character of Xiao Yu and focuses on her emotional turmoil. She has been dating a married man for many years. Finally she has decided to end the relationship. When she walks into the street, she sees a performance of snakes in a tour vehicle. The tagline is “A marriage is to be. The holy snakes foretell weal and woe.” At this, Xiao Yu smiles because she has taken the initiative to break off her relationship instead of leaving it to fate. The second time we see the image of snakes is when her lover’s wife comes to hit her. Xiao Yu runs away and jumps into the snake touring vehicle. In the vehicle with the snakes she feels safe and gradually calms down. Finally, we see another snake when Xiao Yu is on her way to deliver herself to the police and a snake slithers across the ground. The image of the snake represents the character Xiao Yu. Snakes are known for being aggressive, however, they are also flexible. These features can also be seen in Xiao Yu. She bears the pain of being “the other woman” for years, but also ends the relationship suddenly. She can tolerate harassment from customers but can also kill people when fighting for herself. Another indicator is when Xiao Yu is watching *The Legend of White Snake*<sup>94</sup>. Xiao Yu’s fate is similar to white snake, she cannot choose her birth, relationships, or living status, but she can take her fate into her own hands. An additional instance when Xiao Yu is seen with an animal is when she runs away from the sauna bath center after she kills the officer. She meets an acrobat with a monkey on his shoulder. The image of the monkey indicates that Xiao Yu’s fate is similar to the monkey. She, like the monkey, is tied to her lover.

---

<sup>94</sup> One of China's Four Great Folktales. It talks about a story of a white snake who is saved by a man called Xu Xian. After twenty years, the white snake transforms into a woman and marries Xu Xian as a reward for his care and attention. However, another man Fa Hai thinks the white snake is evil and tries to destroy their marriage. After much frustration, the white snake and Xu Xian live together in happiness.

In the last story, the character Xiao Hui is a migrant worker. Online he is known as: “I am just a little bird”. As I mentioned in the third section in Chapter two, his online name is also the name of a song, and there is a verse in the song that says: “Sometimes I think I’m like a tiny bird, who wants to fly, but can never fly high.”<sup>95</sup> This is exactly what Xiao Hui’s life is like. He wants to earn more money and he wants to have his love. But this is not his fate and reality for him is always cruel. After he goes to Dong Guan, he meets a girl named Lian Rong and he falls in love with her. However, Lian Rong has a three-year-old daughter so she has to work as a prostitute in order to make ends meet. She asks Xiao Hui to release fishes with her. At that point, Xiao Hui asks her to leave with him, but Lian Rong refuses. The fish in the tank represent the character Lian Rong. She lives off the customers, just as the fish lives by people feeding it. She is used to living in these conditions and if it changes, she cannot adapt to that change. The fish are similar because although they live in the tank, once they swim out of the tank, they will die. In the end, Lian Rong stays in the “tank”, and Xiao Hui cannot stand this pressure so he commits suicide.

### 3. The Recurring Plots

As a leader of the Sixth Generation directors, Jia Zhangke not only shares common ground with others of his generation, but he also has his own personal creative vision. The most important feature in Jia’s films is the symbolism. Symbolism is the way directors express their unique artistic personality. These symbols are portrayed through

---

<sup>95</sup> I am just a little bird, by Zhao Chuan. Translation from the Internet.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkl\\_7XslVf4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkl_7XslVf4) The original text in Chinese as follow: 有时候我觉得自己像一只小小鸟，想要飞却怎么样也飞不高。

language, sound, or images. For example, in Fifth Generation director Zhang Yimou's early work, he focuses on color symbols. In *Red Sorghum* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 1988) and *Raise the Red Lantern* (dir. Zhang Yimou, 1991), the films consistently feature the color red: the characters' clothes, the sunset, the sky, the sorghum and the lantern. The color red becomes a symbol of these films. In traditional Chinese culture, red stands for festivities and happiness. Zhang Yimou uses this color symbol to represent the subject of the film and express the Chinese ethos and energy. As a director who deals with realistic modern life, Jia Zhangke has developed a recognizable style through the use of recurring symbols in his films.

As I noted above, Da Hai walks in the street, and he sees a villager who is beating a horse to climb uphill. The horse tries but fails again and again. The same plot point shows up in the film *Unknown Pleasures*. One of the main characters Xiao Ji tries to ride a motorcycle up a slope. He tries several times but fails again and again. Jia Zhangke said about this plot:

In the original screenplay there is nothing wrong with the motorcycle, so that scene was something that came out spontaneously during shooting. Suddenly the motorcycle wouldn't go up the hill and began to stall. I should have yelled cut right there but I discovered that the actor's expression at that moment was so close to what the character was going through. He looked so anxious, he wanted to make it up the hill, he wanted to get through his youth, and to get the scene right.

This mirrors the scene from *A Touch of Sin* with the horse. The whole scene continues for about 100 seconds. Jia Zhangke uses this uphill battle to imply that there is much struggle in the lives of those who are from the lower class and suffer such oppression and forced labour.

Another recurring sequence in *A Touch of Sin* is displayed in the third story, when the officers come to ask Xiao Yu to offer them her sexual services, and she repeats several actions. First, every time the officers open the door, Xiao Yu stands up and closes it. Second, every time the officer pulls her down, she stands up and looks at the officer. Third, every time she is hit with the money, she runs around to face the officer again. This symbol of repetitive action is also shown in *Unknown Pleasures*. When Qiao Qiao is scolded by her boss in a vehicle, each time she tries to get out of the car, the boss pulls her down. This action is repeated eleven times. This action represents the character's stubbornness and the impossibility of attempting to gain control when you are weak. They cannot do anything against the abuse but repeat the action to show their anger. The third symbol is when Xiao Yu is released from prison, she walks in the drifting sand, and she uses a veil to hide her face. In *Unknown Pleasures*, Qiao Qiao also uses a veil to shade the sun. Jia Zhangke explains this repeated plot in the outtake of *Unknown Pleasures*, and says that this represents a form of self-protection for these characters.

Another recurring feature in Jia Zhangke's films is language. The use of dialect lends his films great charm. Jia Zhangke said in an interview, "I think that being able to speak in dialects is a lucky thing, because different dialects represent different ways of thought."<sup>96</sup> In *A Touch of Sin*, most of the characters speak dialects instead of Putonghua. By using these dialects, Jia Zhangke accurately reflects the characters' level of education and their status in society. For example, when Da Hai talks with people, he calls himself "laozi" (which means "me", this term is most used in Sichuan dialects, but it insults others by implying "I'm your father"). Another example is when Lian Rong and Xiao

---

<sup>96</sup> From an interview, posted on: <https://v.qq.com/x/page/f0170djbqq.html>

Hui are reading online posts, and Xiao Hui responds by using the comment “TMD” The term TMD is short form for the word “tamade”, a crude expletive that illustrates their crass, lower status. These examples of dialect usage accurately display the characters’ education level and made the film more believable and realistic. Different from Jia Zhangke's earlier films, *A Touch of Sin* features professional actors. In order to correspond to the filming location, Jia Zhangke asked the actor Jiang Wu, who plays Da Hai for the first section, to learn the Shanxi dialect. Jia said: “I think language is a way of defining identity. Moreover, the film can be expressed more accurately and sentimentally by using dialects.” This use of language becomes a unique recurring feature of Jia Zhangke’s film.

Another interesting scene in *A Touch of Sin* occurs at the end of the film. Xiao Yu is released from prison and comes to Shanxi to start over. When she walks by the wall, there is an opera playing on the stage called *The Story of Sue San* (Yu Tang Chun, 玉堂春) and a crowd of people form to watch it. This opera is about a prostitute named Sue San, who has been wrongfully accused of killing her husband. Her fate is similar to Xiao Yu’s fate. When Sue San talks about her grievances, Xiao Yu has an understanding of her experiences. The judge asks, “Sue San! Do you understand your sin?” The camera focuses in on Xiao Yu’s face, she looks down and cries. At this point, although the judge is addressing Sue San, it appears as if the judge is asking Xiao Yu. Then the camera pans to the crowd of people. With this action, the spectator culture is evident. Jia Zhangke uses this kind of ending in *Xiao Wu* (see the second section of the first chapter), and by doing so, he is making everyone in the audience feel the same emotions as the characters. When the camera turns to these people, they are staring into the camera and refer to “you.” This

“you” has a double meaning as it could refer to the judge or the audience viewing the film. The crowd seems to be staring at the audience through the camera. It seems as if they are passing this question through the camera to the audience. Do you, in the audience, know your sins? Does society know its sins? The camera brings a sense of reality that “you” cannot escape judgment and taunting crowds might yet have their sights set upon “you”.

These recurring plot elements become a highlight in Jia Zhangke’s films since they contain multiple references and meanings and leave much of their interpretation to the imagination of audiences. From these four stories, Jia Zhangke shows the reality of society in contemporary China. Some scholars tend to focus on the violent events depicted in *A Touch of Sin*. However, in my point of view, Jia Zhangke has done more than just produce a film sensationalizing violence. Jia employs a variety of aesthetic elements such as metaphors to create an atmosphere or sense of social reality to the audience without merely reproducing straightforward realist tropes. He not only illustrates the violent events, but also leaves the audience with the question, “why does it happen?” Perhaps the title is the best answer: “Tianzhuding” (decided by fate), fate was in charge.

## Conclusion

*Close analysis unlocks the secrets of how film images, combined with sound, can have such a profound effect on our minds and emotions.*

—Marilyn Fabe<sup>97</sup>

When Michael Berry recalled his experience of teaching a course about Jia Zhangke's film *Xiao Wu* in a university, he said: "I scanned the room looking for signs that the students had been as blown away by the film as Scorsese<sup>98</sup>, or any number of other critics or film fans, myself included, that had been utterly floored by the film's sheer passion, honesty and power — there were few." This might be one of the reasons that Michael Berry wrote the book, *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy'*, and revealed the comprehensive and detailed cinematic universe that Jia Zhangke has built. As I quoted from Marilyn Fabe<sup>99</sup>, engaging in film criticism can give the audience a better and deeper understanding of a film.

Unlike most feature films, which are easy to understand, documentary or literary films are sometimes more confusing and obscure, especially when understanding an auteur's idiosyncratic impulses becomes the most important factor in understanding their films. Jia Zhangke is a director of this kind. He remains clear about the goal of his

---

<sup>97</sup> Marilyn Fabe, *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2004. p. xv.

<sup>98</sup> Martin Scorsese is an American director, who believes that Jia Zhangke "reinvented cinema". Jia Zhangke talked about their meeting, Martin Scorsese, my "Elder" in his book *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out*, p. 223.

<sup>99</sup> Marilyn Fabe is a senior lecturer of Department of Film and Media at the University of California, Berkeley. She teaches film courses from history and aesthetics perspectives.

filmmaking: We cannot ignore those who were left behind just because the whole country is running forward<sup>100</sup>. Even now when some of the Sixth Generation directors have made the slow shift to commercial films, Jia Zhangke is still working on independent cinema and speaking out for the people who have little voice in the developing Chinese society. This is why it is so important to research his filmmaking techniques. When we are familiar with his cinematic techniques, we can get a more complete understanding of his films in order to comprehend what he wants to convey to the audience. In this thesis I have analyzed three kinds of techniques in his films: visual expression, popular music and narrative style. These are, I believe, the most distinctive features in Jia Zhangke's filmmaking. To cover the spectrum of his techniques, I chose films from different periods in his career, for example, his early works --- the Hometown Trilogy, and his later works --- *A Touch of Sin*, *Still Life*, and his latest film *Mountains May Depart*. Although his filmmaking has changed over time, we can see some unique features that he uses consistently throughout his work. My primary goal is to uncover the real world in Jia Zhangke's films and to analyze the subjects the director wants to bring attention to. Through close analysis, I point out these stylistic features and illustrate the sense of real life in Chinese society from Jia Zhangke's point of view. This is not only a way to look back at Jia's creations, but also a way to learn and understand his films from new perspectives. Each time I re-watch one of his films, I am confronted with different thoughts and questions. I suppose that is the most fascinating part of Jia Zhangke's films.

---

<sup>100</sup> According to an interview: "Jia Zhangke: buneng yinwei gaosu fazhan er hulve ruoshi renqun" (We cannot ignore the vulnerable group while the economics were in a rapid development.) <http://v.ifeng.com/opinion/china/200903/bb1e82df-8a0b-43fa-bc0f-645ed46c9c99.shtml>

My thesis does not exhaust the possibilities for studying Jia Zhangke's cinema. That requires a future study of his films and his own notes and interviews.

One of the future study lines could be a comparison of Jia Zhangke's early films with his later films. As I noted, I am trying to cover most of his creative period in this thesis, in order to get a more comprehensive understanding of his films. However, my focus was only on his film techniques, and not on a deep analysis of the transformations throughout his film career. I do believe that attempting to analyze and compare the features and changes of Jia Zhangke's films from his different creative periods will be a worthwhile topic. A director's work can be influenced by a variety of features, personal experiences, time period, social development and so on. Jia Zhangke's unique filmmaking style is evident in his different works throughout the different stages of his film career. However, as time passes, he has come to a different understanding of life that has changed his stylistic approach to filmmaking. In his latest film, *Mountain May Depart*, we can see that he is only moderately concerned with representing the real world. It would be worth exploring the main subjects in each of his creative periods to discover whether there is a connection between his films.

Another line of further study would be from a wider perspective: Jia's place in the Sixth Generation. I mentioned a PhD dissertation by Mei Yang in the literature review. Yang discusses a similar topic. In her dissertation, she divides "the Sixth Generation" into three groups according to the different subjects the directors' focus on. From another perspective, we can see that the Sixth Generation has divided into different groups. Some of them have become commercial directors, like Guan Hu, director of *Mr. Six* (2015), and Lu Chuan, director of *The Last Supper* (2012); some of them continue to insist on making

literary films, like Lou Ye, Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai. The latter group is experiencing a renaissance as underground films gain more widespread interest and acceptance. There are a few directors that straddle the line between these two groups. For example, Ning Hao. He is a director that established his own style during the transformation to the commercial film field. Therefore, he keeps some features of his original style and combines them with new cinematic techniques in his more recent films. I believe that the rapid development of the Sixth Generation directors is a promising topic for future research. Every study regarding the Sixth Generation will be a great contribution to the area of Chinese cinema. I hope my thesis will be a useful resource to researchers who are interested in Chinese cinema and independent films and contribute to the growing body of film analysis available to fans of Jia Zhangke.

## Bibliography

Berry, Chris. *Chinese Films in Focus II*. Second Edition. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.

Berry, Michael. *Jia Zhangke's 'Hometown Trilogy': Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown Pleasures*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.

———. Preface. *The Feeling of Coming Back Home*, by Berry Michael. 2010. P. 001-002.

———. *Speaking in Images: Interviews with Contemporary Chinese filmmakers*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.

Cai, Jingjie. “Shanheguren Zhong de xiandaixing Duanlie Fansi” (Analysis of the Modernity in *Mountains May Depart*). *Dianyingwenzue* (Movie Literature), no.7, 2016.

Chen, Juan. “Tianzhuding yingpian zhong dongwu xingxiang de fuhaojia jiedu” (Analysis of the symbols of animals in the film *A Touch of Sin*.) *Dianying Pingjie* (Film Review), no.17, 2014.

Chen, Jun. “‘Xiangxiaren jincheng’ yingxiangzhong de wenxue xushu—lun Jia Zhangke de Xiao Wu yu Shijie” (Literature description in the picture of ‘Countryman goes to the city’—Comment on Jia Zhangke’s *Xiao Wu* and *The World*). *Wenxue pinglun* (Literary Review), no. 4, 2007.

Cheung, Esther. “Realisms within Conundrum: The Personal and Authentic Appeal in Jia Zhangke’s Accented Films.” *China Perspectives*, no.1, 2010.

Dafeng Film, “Yiwen kandong dianying kuangaobi fazhanshi” (An article that help you to understand the development of film aspect ratio). *Yingshi Gongyewang* (Film Industry Website), August 26, 2015.

<http://107cine.com/stream/69056>

Fabe, Marilyn. *Closely Watched Films: An Introduction to the Art of Narrative Film Technique*. Berkeley/Los Angeles/London: University of California Press, 2004.

Fenghuang Shipin. “Jia Zhangke: buneng yinwei gaosu fazhan er hulve ruoshi renqun” (Jia Zhangke: We cannot ignore the vulnerable group while the economics were in a rapid development.) *Fenghuang Shipin (IfengVideo)*, March 13, 2009.  
<http://v.ifeng.com/opinion/china/200903/bb1e82df-8a0b-43fa-bc0f-645ed46c9c99.shtml>

Festival de Cannes. “MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART -conference- (en) Cannes 2015”. *Festival de Cannes (Officiel)*, May 20, 2015.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h7D02Ptx11o>

Germann, Jennifer. *Documenting Postsocialist Reality: The Films of Jia Zhangke*, M. A. Thesis, McGill University, 2010.

Han, Yijia. “Xianshi zhuyi de xuanxie yu xiayi jingshen de baoli---qianxi Jia Zhangke dianying Tianzhuding” (Vent for the realism and the violence of the swordsman’s spirits--analysis of Jia Zhangke’s *A Touch of Sin*). *Dianying pingjie (Film Review)*, no.3, 2014.

He, Miao. “‘Wo zhishi ge dianying mingong’—guanyu Xiao Wu daoyan Jia Zhangke” (I am just a laborer of the films— About Jia Zhangke, the director of *Xiao Wu*). *Zhongguo qingnian (China Youth)*, no.5, 1999.

Ipo Hirvonen, “Departing Borders and the Flux of Change”, March 19, 2016.  
[http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3740778/reviews?ref\\_=tt\\_ov\\_rt](http://www.imdb.com/title/tt3740778/reviews?ref_=tt_ov_rt)

Jia, Zhangke. *Jia Zhangke Speaks Out: The Chinese Director’s Texts on Film*. Translated by Claire, Huot, et al. Piscataway: Transaction Publishers, 2015.

———. Interview. *Mountains May Depart*. Dir. Jia Zhangke. TF1/Ad Vitam. 2015. DVD.

Li, Fan. “Kan Jia Zhangke de xieshi zhuyi dianying yuyan” (A glance of Jia Zhangke’s realistic cinematography language). *Shidai renwu (Times Figure)*, no. 11, 2008.

Li, Jiuru. “Shenheguren: Chuangshang, Huaijiu yu Xiangchou” (*Mountains May Depart*: Wound, Nostalgia and Homesick). *Dianyingyishu (Film Art)*, no.1, 2016.

Lin, Huocan. “‘feimei’ nengfou cheng meiqi ‘jiuming daocao’” (Whether “Non-coal mine companies” could be the last hope to the coal mine companies?). *Zhongguo jingjiwang (China Economic Net)*, May 20, 2014.

[http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/201405/20/t20140520\\_2840012.shtml](http://www.ce.cn/xwzx/gnsz/gdxw/201405/20/t20140520_2840012.shtml)

Lin Xiaoping. *Children of Marx and Coca-Cola: Chinese Avant-garde Art and Independent Cinema*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2010.

Lin, Xudong, Zhang, Yaxuan and Gu, Zheng. “*Jia Zhangke dianying: Zhantai*” (*Jia Zhangke’s Film: Platform*). Beijing: Zhongguo Mangwen Press, 2003.

———. “*Jia Zhangke dianying: Renxiaoyao*” (*Jia Zhangke’s Film: Unknown Pleasures*). Beijing: Zhongguo mangwen Press, 2003.

Liu, Mingyang. “*Cong Xiao Wu dao Shanheguren: Jia Zhangke de bian yu bubian*” (From *Xiao Wu* to *Mountains May Depart*: What has changed in Jia Zhangke’s films). *Yishuguangjiao (Art Panorama)*, no. 1, 2016.

Liu, Wu. *Above Ground or Under Ground: The Emergence and Transformation of “Sixth Generation” Film-Makers in Mainland China*. M.A. Thesis, University of Victoria, 2008.

Mao, Jian. “*Bei zhuangdao de ren*” (People who were knocked down), March 16, 2014, <https://www.douban.com/group/topic/50232092/>

Meng, Ying. “*Pintu youxi: lun Jia Zhangke Tianzhuding dianying xushi*” (The game of puzzle: analysis of Jia Zhangke’s film *A Touch of Sin*’s movie narrative.) *Hunan guangbo dianshi daxue xuebao (Journal of Hunan Radio and Television University)*, no. 4, 2015.

Nalan, Xingde. “*Changxiangsi·Shanyicheng*” (To the Tune of Chang Xiang Si). Translated by Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie (Gladys Yang). December 26, 2009. <http://www.en84.com/dianji/ci/200912/00000720.html>

Ning, Suhua. “*Cong Jia Zhangke dianying Xiao Wu kan ‘zuozhe dianying’ libi*” (From Jia Zhangke’s film *Xiao Wu* to see the advantage and disadvantage of auteur theory). *Mingzuo xinshang (Masterpieces Review)*, no. 12, 2014.

Oumano, Elena. *Cinema Today: A Conversation with Thirty-Nine Filmmakers from Around the World*. New Brunswick, N.J: Rutgers University Press, 2011.

Rayns, Tony. “Jia Zhangke in London: Q&As at the BFI and King’s College”, May 18, 2014.

<http://www.easternkicks.com/news/jia-zhangke-in-london-qas-at-the-bfi-and-kings-college>

———. “The old and the new,” *Sight & Sound*, June 2014.

<http://cinophilia.net/28556>

Sinovision Journal. “Jia Zhangke Talks About *Mountains May Depart*,” *Sinovision Journal*, October 8, 2015.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cA2BRmUdMlg>

Sobchack, Thomas and Sobchack, Vivian. *An Introduction to Film*. Second Edition. Boston: Pearson Education, 1987.

Song, Tingting. *Independent Cinema in the Chinese Film Industry*. PhD Dissertation, Queensland University of Technology, 2010.

Tengxun. “Jia Zhangke tan shanheguren: yongyou fangyan shi xingfude” (Jia Zhangke talks about *Mountains May Depart*: Being able to speak in dialects is a lucky thing), *Tengxun Website*, October 27, 2015.

<https://v.qq.com/x/page/f0170djbicq.html>

Wan, Jing. “Cong Shneheguren kan Jiashi Dianying de Tansuo yu Chuangxin” (Research on Jia’s films’ exploration and Innovation from *Mountains May Depart*). *Xijuzhijia (Home Drama)*, no.22, 2015.

Wei, Mu’er and Zhao, Daguai. “Jia Zhangke: wo buxiangxin nineng caidui women de jieju” (Jia Zhangke: I don’t believe that you can predict our end). *Douban (Douban Website)*, July 23, 2010.

<https://www.douban.com/note/81901177/>

Xie, Xiaoxia. “Shuqing ‘shouyiren’ de yingxiang shengcun—chongdu Jia Zhangke dianying *Xiao Wu*” (The image of lyrical craftsman in the film—Watch *Xiao Wu* again). *Dianying wenxue (Movie Literature)*, no. 22, 2007.

Yang, Danxiu. “*Xiao Wu* tese jingtou yuyan fenxi” (Analysis of *Xiao Wu*’s unique lens language). *Dianying pingjie (Film Review)*, no. 3, 2007: 37.

Yang, Mei. *Cinematic Realism and Independent Filmmaking in China*. PhD Dissertation, University of Oregon, 2011.

Yu, Jie and Guo, Peiyun. “Houzhimin zhuyi yujingxia de zhongguo minzu dianying” (A Research into Chinese National Cinema in the Postcolonial Contest), *Yinshan xuekan (Yinshan Academic Journal)*, Vol. 26, no. 6, 2013: 42-45.

Yu, Yi. “Chuanguo wuye zhimen, lun Jia Zhangke: xianshi yizhong” (Through the Midnight Gate, On Jia Zhangke: A kind of Reality). *Huacheng Chubanshe (Huacheng Press)*, 2009.

<https://www.douban.com/group/topic/1706961/>

Zhang Xudong. “Poetics of Vanishing: The Films of Jia Zhangke” *New Left Review* 63, 2010.

Zhang Xuanqian and Zhou, Xing. “Shanheguren: Kuayue shikong de Qinggan Shuxie” (*Mountains May Depart: Emotion across Time and Space*). *Dianyingpingjie (Film Review)*, no.3, 2016.

Zhao, Bowen. ‘Bianyuan renwu shehuihua’ de yingshi yiyi sikao” (Analyze the media significance of the socialization of the marginalized people). *Dianying wenxue (Movie Literature)*, no.21, 2010.

Zhao, Chuan. *I am a Tiny Bird*. By Li, Zongsheng. Rock Records Co., Ltd. October 4, 2016.

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkl\\_7XsIVf4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tkl_7XsIVf4)

Zhongguo ribaowang. “Zhongguo dianying diwudai daoyan” (The Fifth Generation Directors in Chinese Film Industry). *Zhongguo ribaowang (China Daily Website)* August 26, 2009,

[http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/zgzx/60nian/2009-08/26/content\\_8619099.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/zgzx/60nian/2009-08/26/content_8619099.htm)