

Article

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**Pleasures Caught by the Tides:
The Idea of China in the Films of Jia Zhangke**



Abstract: This essay examines the cinema of Jia Zhangke as a sustained meditation on the transformation of contemporary China. Spanning from *Xiao Wu* (1997) to *Mountains May Depart* (2015), Jia's body of work articulates the tension between local histories and global modernity through an evolving realist aesthetic. Drawing on influences from Italian Neorealism, Taiwanese New Cinema, and classical Shanghai melodrama, Jia constructs a cinematic universe grounded in the everyday lives of China's marginalized populations. The essay traces his stylistic evolution from minimalist realism to hybrid experimentation, his negotiation with state censorship, and his on-going effort to preserve human dignity amid economic upheaval.

Keywords: Neorealism, Alienation, Modernization, Slow Cinema, Urban Displacement, Underground Independence, Negotiating the State, Alternative Historiography

Jia Zhangke, one of the most significant voices in contemporary Chinese cinema, was born in 1970 in Fenyang, a modest industrial town in Shanxi province—an area known primarily for its extensive coal mining industry. This small, somewhat isolated community, surrounded by the remnants of China's socialist-era infrastructure, would

become the central axis of Jia's entire cinematic universe. The landscape of Shanxi, with its decaying buildings, weathered faces, and air of economic fatigue, functions in his films not merely as a setting but as a living, breathing organism—an emotional and historical repository of modern China's contradictions.

Origins and Collaborations: The Formation of a Cinematic World

From the earliest stages of his career, Jia's filmmaking was shaped by the tension between the local and the global, between provincial life and the encroaching effects of modernization. His debut feature *Xiao Wu* (1997) immediately established these preoccupations: a story about a petty thief unable to adapt to China's transition from socialism to a market economy. Like much of his later work, it combined documentary realism with allegorical depth.

Equally integral to Jia's success is his unique collaborative ethos. Rather than adopting a purely hierarchical model of film production, he has cultivated an intimate circle of collaborators who have worked with him for decades. Among these, the actor Wang Hongwei—a classmate from the Beijing Film Academy—has appeared in numerous early films, embodying the everyday man of Jia's cinematic universe. Cinematographer Yu Lik-wai, sound designer Zhang Yang, and composer Lim Giong have each played pivotal roles in constructing Jia's distinctive sensory language: one defined by slow, meditative camera movement, ambient soundscapes, and music that fuses electronic textures with traditional motifs.

The most central figure in this creative circle is Zhao Tao, Jia's wife and leading actress, whose background in dance informs her fluid, expressive performances. She has appeared in every Jia feature since *Platform* (2000), shaping the emotional core of his cinema. Her presence has become almost synonymous with Jia's vision of modern China—poised, resilient, yet profoundly marked by the disorientations of change.

Perhaps the most symbolic example of Jia's collaborative method, however, is his recurring casting of his cousin, Han Sanming, an actual coal miner. Han first appeared in *Platform* as a miner named Sanming, a role he has reprised in various forms across Jia's later works. His continued reappearance—as himself, as archetype, as allegory—invites the viewer to imagine a shared cinematic universe, what some critics half-jokingly call the “Sanming Cinematic Universe.” Through this figure, Jia anchors his films in the world of the working class, returning again and again to the lives of those marginalized by China's economic miracle.

By contrast, Jia's own occasional appearances on screen carry a more self-reflexive and destabilizing energy. In *Xiao Wu*, he briefly appears as a character who breaks the illusion of sympathy just as the audience begins to feel empathy for the protagonist, reminding us of the social distance between filmmaker and subject. In *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), his cameo as a street singer functions as a haunting premonition of the protagonists' aimlessness, while in *A Touch of Sin* (2013) and *The Hedonists* (2016), he plays a cigar-smoking tycoon—“Boss Jia”—whose ostentatious wealth mocks the struggles of ordinary people.

Despite the geographical breadth of his work—from the desolate landscapes of Shanxi to futuristic visions of Australia—Jia's films always circle back to Fenyang. The decaying concrete walls, the gray skies, the slow rhythms of small-town life: all of these elements form the moral and emotional bedrock of his cinema. As the critic Tony Rayns once observed, Jia could be called

“China’s Bruce Springsteen”—a chronicler of the working class, whose stories capture both the sorrow and dignity of those left behind by progress.

Italian Influences: Realism, Architecture, and the Politics of Space

The influence of post-war Italian cinema—particularly Roberto Rossellini and Michelangelo Antonioni—on Jia Zhangke’s work is unmistakable, though it is important to situate this influence not as imitation but as dialogue. Italian Neorealism has long provided a global vocabulary for filmmakers grappling with poverty, transition, and modernity. For Jia, this tradition offers both a formal framework and an ethical orientation.

The structural echoes of Rossellini’s *Rome, Open City* (1945) can be detected in Jia’s commitment to social documentation, while Antonioni’s *Il grido* (1957)—with its wandering, working-class protagonist—finds resonance in *Still Life* (2006) and *A Touch of Sin*. Yet, perhaps Antonioni’s most enduring influence lies in the use of architecture as a means of expressing alienation. Like Antonioni’s Italy, Jia’s China is full of crumbling walls, half-demolished buildings, and liminal spaces that mirror the disintegration of moral and social coherence.

Interestingly, many of the ancient city walls seen in Jia’s early films were not actually filmed in Fenyang but in nearby Pingyao—a practical decision, since most of Fenyang’s historical walls were demolished during Jia’s childhood. Nonetheless, these walls play a crucial symbolic role across his oeuvre. In *Xiao Wu*, they provide the backdrop for a fleeting romantic encounter; in *Platform*, they mark the union and eventual separation of the

central couple; in *A Touch of Sin*, they serve as a visual anchor for the film’s climax, linking contemporary violence to the timelessness of social injustice.

While Jia’s realism shares much with Italian Neorealism—non-professional actors, dialect speech, on-location shooting, and a focus on the marginalized—he diverges from its straightforward documentary impulse. Even in his earliest work, Jia’s realism is already stylized, refracted through a poetic awareness of sound, gesture, and temporal dislocation.

As film scholar Rey Chow has argued, Jia’s cinema “makes visible the invisible forces of modernization”—those abstract economic and political processes that shape lived experience but remain beyond individual comprehension. His use of space and architecture thus becomes political: the ruined walls and desolate factories of Shanxi are not merely background, but embodiments of history itself, monuments to the cost of China’s modernization.

Sound, Surrealism, and the Expansion of Realism

If Jia’s visual sensibility owes something to Italian cinema, his sound design introduces a more distinctly experimental dimension. *Xiao Wu*’s soundscape is dense and chaotic: the clamour of construction, the drone of radios, fragments of bureaucratic speech, and snatches of pop songs all intermingle. This sonic overload mirrors the protagonist’s inner turmoil, producing a realism that feels strangely hallucinatory.

As Jia’s career evolved, this flirtation with the surreal became increasingly overt. *The World* (2004) features animated interludes that visualize text messages, reflecting a

generation's alienation in an age of mediated communication. *Still Life* introduces a UFO hovering over the Three Gorges Dam—a deadpan gesture that playfully collapses realism into absurdity. In *A Touch of Sin*, a green snake glides across the screen just before a character's violent outburst, signalling mythic transformation. And by the time of *Mountains May Depart* (2015), Jia has moved fully into allegorical futurism, imagining a fractured world of emotional exile and global displacement.

For Jia, such departures from realism are not mere aesthetic indulgence; they express the inadequacy of realism itself in representing the dizzying pace of social transformation. As China modernizes faster than narratives can keep up, Jia's films oscillate between documentary precision and dreamlike estrangement. His worlds are not simply real—they are *hyper real*, where capitalism, technology, and desire converge in surreal ways.

This ambivalent realism aligns with what critic Ackbar Abbas calls the “culture of disappearance”—a sensibility that pervades Chinese and Hong Kong modernity, in which the past is always vanishing even as it is continually resurrected in mediated form. Jia's characters inhabit precisely this in-between space: haunted by what has been lost, yet unable to locate themselves within the world that replaces it.

From Bresson to Mean Streets: The Ethics of Alienation

The alternate English title of *Xiao Wu*—*Pickpocket*—inevitably invites comparison with Robert Bresson's 1959 masterpiece. Yet the two films could not be more different in

moral outlook. Bresson's Michel is an ascetic intellectual, his crimes imbued with metaphysical significance; Jia's pickpocket, by contrast, is a petty delinquent adrift in the ruins of a collapsing moral order. Where Bresson's protagonist achieves redemption through spiritual awakening, Jia's Xiao Wu remains trapped—an emblem of stasis and decline.

If Bresson's *A Man Escaped* influenced Jia in terms of sonic precision and patience, the emotional temperature of *Xiao Wu* is far closer to Martin Scorsese's *Mean Streets* (1973). Like Scorsese's Johnny Boy, Jia's antihero embodies a self-destructive refusal to evolve. His world is not governed by metaphysics but by apathy—a paralysis induced by the rapid disintegration of social values in post-reform China.

Bresson's famed “flat” performances—his use of non-actors to strip away theatricality—resonate faintly in Jia's work, yet Jia pursues an opposite goal: emotional realism. His camera lingers on faces, gestures, and environments, inviting empathy rather than detachment. And yet, through his deliberate pacing and occasional disruptions—such as direct looks to the camera or jarring sound shifts—Jia constantly reminds the viewer of the constructed nature of cinematic truth.

In this way, Xiao Wu stands as both homage and critique: it borrows Bresson's moral minimalism but transforms it into a sociological lament. Jia's realism, unlike Bresson's transcendentalism, is grounded in the material. It seeks not grace but understanding—a portrait of a nation suspended between the loss of its socialist ideals and the birth of an uncertain capitalist future.

From Minimalism to Movement: Jia Zhangke and the Evolution of Slow Cinema

Jia Zhangke emerged in the late 1990s at a time when international critics were becoming increasingly attuned to what was being loosely labelled “Asian Minimalism” or the “Slow Cinema” movement. This label, though often oversimplified, referred to a shared aesthetic among certain East and Southeast Asian directors who rejected commercial conventions—favouring long takes, minimal dialogue, and observational pacing that emphasized atmosphere over plot.

Films like *Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) were central to this trend. Alongside contemporaries such as Apichatpong Weerasethakul from Thailand and Hong Sang-soo from South Korea, Jia became known for exploring the texture of everyday life through stillness and duration. Critics like Jonathan Romney and Matthew Flanagan would later identify this “slow” aesthetic as a philosophical mode rather than a style: a cinema of contemplation, rooted in realism but alert to the metaphysical.

Jia’s connection to New Taiwanese Cinema—particularly to Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, and Tsai Ming-liang—was decisive. Like them, he crafted films about youth, alienation, and modernization. The drifting narratives of *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures* echo Hou’s *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996), where plot is dissolved into mood. Tsai’s influence can be seen in Jia’s treatment of isolation and urban alienation, though Jia’s tone tends to be more sociological than existential.

Yet Jia ultimately moved beyond minimalism. With *The World* (2004), his first state-approved feature, he embraced digital filmmaking and began to experiment with more dynamic camera movement, digital effects, and expressive editing. This shift mirrors what film theorist Dudley Andrew calls the “re-temporalization of realism”—an evolution from stillness toward rhythm, reflecting how digital cinema captures modern speed and flux.

Platform remains Jia’s most rigorously minimalist work—an epic of provincial youth discovering pop culture and capitalism, unfolding in patient, tableau-like sequences. However, by *Still Life* (2006) and *A Touch of Sin* (2013), Jia had developed a more fluid style that incorporated both realism and genre elements, merging documentary patience with the narrative propulsion of classical cinema.

Minimalism, in Jia’s hands, was never a static dogma but a stage in a broader artistic evolution. As scholar Bérénice Reynaud notes, his cinema “slows down time not to escape modernity, but to feel its pressure.” The long takes and silences in his early films are thus not aesthetic postures but social diagnostics—expressions of time itself as experienced under economic transition.

Echoes of Taiwan: Memory, Collaboration, and Urban Displacement

Jia’s artistic kinship with New Taiwanese Cinema runs deeper than stylistic affinity. It extends to structure, theme, and philosophy. Among the films that most profoundly influenced him is Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *The Boys from Fengkuei* (1983), which follows a group of young men leaving their rural

hometown for an alienating urban environment. The film's juxtaposition of small-town intimacy and urban anonymity directly anticipates Jia's *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures*. Even visually, Hou's image of a city framed through a crumbling concrete ruin reappears in Jia's own compositions, carrying forward its symbolic resonance—the persistence of the past within the modern.

Jia has often expressed admiration for Edward Yang, whose films (*Taipei Story*, *Yi Yi*) dissect the psychological and moral disorientation of Taipei's urban middle class. Yang's critique of modernization through intimate, domestic narratives resonates strongly with Jia's vision of working-class dislocation in mainland China. If Hou's cinema is elegiac and historical, Yang's is analytical and sociological—and Jia's work synthesizes both tendencies.

A particularly telling point of contact is Hou's collaborative method, developed alongside screenwriter Chu T'ien-wen and a recurring ensemble of actors and artists. Hou's use of personal memory and collective authorship has a clear echo in Jia's process. Jia's *The World* (2004) was inspired by lead actress Zhao Tao's real-life friends who worked as dancers in Beijing's theme park "World Park." Similarly, *Still Life* was informed by the real demolition and displacement witnessed during the Three Gorges Dam project.

Moreover, Jia's long-time partnership with cinematographer Yu Lik-wai recalls Hou's collaboration with Chen Hwai-en and Mark Lee Ping-bing—visual stylists whose mastery of natural light and spatial composition shaped the aesthetic of contemporary Asian

realism. Both Hou and Jia use the static camera not for mere formalism, but to evoke historical depth and emotional memory within a frame.

Although Hou's *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998) is only tangentially related to Jia's work, Jia directly references it in his documentary *I Wish I Knew* (2010). Both films explore the relationship between private memory and national history, and both articulate what scholar Chris Berry calls "the melancholy of transition"—a longing for coherence in societies caught between competing modernity.

In many ways, Jia's cinema could be understood as an extension of Taiwanese modernism onto mainland soil. Where Hou and Yang chronicled the modernization of Taipei, Jia records the transformation of Fenyang, Datong, and Beijing—cities that function not as backdrops but as social laboratories for China's neoliberal experiment.

Shanghai's Legacy: From Fei Mu to Jia Zhangke

While much of global film discourse has focused on post-reform Chinese cinema, Jia Zhangke's work also draws from a deeper historical reservoir: the Shanghai cinema of the 1930s and 1940s. This era, often overlooked in Western scholarship, represents one of the richest periods in Chinese film history.

Two films in particular—Yuan Muzhi's *Street Angel* (1937) and Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* (1948)—stand out as key precursors to Jia's vision. *Street Angel*, a semi-musical melodrama, captures urban life in pre-war Shanghai through a combination of

lyrical realism and political critique. It tells the story of two neighbours who fall in love across a narrow street, blending song sequences, social commentary, and stylistic flourishes reminiscent of Josef von Sternberg's late silent films. Though Yuan's directorial career was brief, *Street Angel* remains a landmark of early urban Chinese cinema, a work that introduced humour, musicality, and sentimentality into social critique.

However, it is Fei Mu's *Spring in a Small Town* that exerts the greater influence on Jia's cinema. Set in a war-torn household, the film depicts a quiet love triangle, unfolding in restrained long takes that emphasize psychological nuance over narrative action. As scholar Zhang Yingjin has argued, Fei Mu's use of space—particularly the crumbling city wall surrounding the family home—transforms architecture into emotion. This formal and thematic strategy finds direct echoes in Jia's *Platform*, *Still Life*, and *Ash Is Purest White*.

In Jia's documentary *I Wish I Knew*, veteran actress Wei Wei recalls Fei Mu's guiding principle: "Inflamed emotions must be kept under control." This dictum encapsulates the aesthetic of minimalist melodrama that defines both Fei Mu and Jia—films of passion restrained by social circumstance and history.

Critics have often compared Jia to Italian or Taiwanese auteurs, but the lineage from Fei Mu may in fact be more revealing. *Spring in a Small Town* anticipated the emotional restraint and architectural poetics of later East Asian cinema, offering a native Chinese model for the fusion of realism and melancholy that characterizes Jia's work.

Through this historical connection, Jia can be seen not as an imitator of European modernism, but as a restorer of a distinctly Chinese modernist tradition.

The Fifth Generation: From Epic Spectacle to Art-House Prestige

To understand Jia's emergence, one must also situate him within the broader taxonomy of Mainland Chinese cinema's "generations." The so-called Fifth Generation, which rose to prominence in the mid-1980s, represented the first cohort of filmmakers trained after the Cultural Revolution. Graduates of the Beijing Film Academy—including Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, and Tian Zhuangzhuang—sought to revitalize Chinese cinema by integrating visual experimentation with national narratives.

Chen's *Yellow Earth* (1984) is often cited as the movement's foundational work. Filmed in Shaanxi province (close to Jia's Shanxi), it combines ethnographic realism with painterly composition, portraying Communist Party ideals through a lyrical study of rural life. Zhang Yimou, who served as cinematographer, would soon direct *Red Sorghum* (1987), an even more stylized evocation of national myth.

During the 1980s, the Fifth Generation was lauded for its artistic innovation and international success, but by the 1990s it had shifted toward grand historical epics designed for global art-house consumption. Films like Zhang's *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991) and Chen's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993)—the latter winning the *Palme d'Or*—embodied what scholars call the "Cinema of Quality," characterized by lavish production values and aesthetic formalism.

For many younger filmmakers, including Jia, these works represented a dead end. The ornate sets and stylized performances of Fifth Generation cinema appeared detached from contemporary social reality. Jia and his peers sought to bring cinema back to the street—to ordinary people, dialects, and lives obscured by the spectacle of national allegory. Where Chen and Zhang constructed mythic visions of China's past, Jia turned his camera toward the fractured present.

The Sixth Generation: Rebellion, Realism, and Underground Independence

The Sixth Generation, to which Jia belongs, emerged in the 1990s as a direct reaction to the state-sponsored prestige of their predecessors. Directors such as Wang Xiaoshuai, Lou Ye, Zhang Yuan, and Li Yang embraced low-budget, independent production methods, often shooting on digital video and distributing their work through underground circuits.

Their films, frequently banned by Chinese censors, chronicled the lives of migrants, artists, and drifters living on the margins of society. Jia's *Xiao Wu* and *Platform* were part of this movement's early wave, combining fiction with documentary observation. Until *The World* (2004), all of Jia's films were made outside the official system—unapproved yet internationally acclaimed.

Among his contemporaries, Lou Ye's *Summer Palace* (2006) stands as a key parallel. Centering on a love story set against the backdrop of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests, the film's frank sexuality and political subject matter led to Lou's temporary ban from filmmaking. Jia responded to *Summer Palace* with his short

Cry Me a River (2008), featuring Zhao Tao, Wang Hongwei, and Lou's actors Hao Lei and Guo Xiaodong. In just twenty minutes, Jia distilled the generational melancholy of Lou's epic into a precise, elegiac meditation on time, love, and regret—a work that might be read as Jia's response to the trauma and repression of the 1980s generation.

The absence of figures like Wang Bing—whose documentaries (*Tie Xi Qu*, *West of the Tracks*) remain outside state control—highlights Jia's gradual institutional integration. While Wang continues to work independently, Jia has chosen partial collaboration with the system, securing domestic distribution and even state recognition. This pragmatic shift reflects not compromise but strategy: a desire to bring stories of ordinary Chinese life to Chinese audiences themselves.

Within this historical trajectory, Jia Zhangke represents both continuity and rupture. He inherits the realist impulse of the Fifth Generation yet rejects its monumentalism; he shares the independence of the Sixth but channels it into dialogue with the state. In his work, the boundaries between rebellion and cooperation blur—mirroring the ambiguous realities of contemporary China itself.

The Documentary Instinct: Cinema as Testimony

Although Jia Zhangke is celebrated primarily as a fiction filmmaker, his practice is deeply rooted in documentary realism. From *Xiao Wu* onward, he has blurred the line between fiction and reportage, incorporating non-actors, handheld camerawork, and real locations that preserve

the textures of everyday life. Yet beyond stylistic realism, Jia's commitment to the documentary mode is ethical—he regards film as a means of recording lives otherwise destined to vanish amid China's rapid modernization.

In the early 2000s, Jia turned explicitly toward documentary with works such as *Dong* (2006), *Useless* (2007), and *I Wish I Knew* (2010). Each explores the intersection of art, labour, and memory, using nonfiction form to illuminate the invisible labour sustaining China's industrial rise.

Dong follows the painter Liu Xiaodong as he produces portraits of construction workers at the Three Gorges Dam—men whose physical toil mirrors the transformation of the landscape itself. The film was shot simultaneously with *Still Life* (2006), sharing both location and mood: the dust of demolition, the roar of machinery, and the melancholic awareness that history is being rewritten through displacement. Together, these two films form a diptych—fiction and documentary intertwining to produce what Jia calls “a double portrait of the human face of modernization.”

In *Useless*, Jia turns his camera toward the textile industry, linking a small garment factory in Guangdong, a fashion designer in Paris, and an abandoned mining town in Shanxi. The title becomes a philosophical provocation: what counts as “useful” in a system that values production over humanity? Through long observational shots, Jia transforms sewing machines, empty warehouses, and discarded clothes into metaphors for labour's devaluation.

I Wish I Knew extends this inquiry to collective memory. Structured around

interviews with twenty people connected to Shanghai's cinematic and political past—including actress Wei Wei and director Hou Hsiu-hsien—it maps the city's century-long metamorphosis. Interwoven among the testimonies is the fictional presence of actress Zhao Tao wandering through modern Shanghai, her silence absorbing the stories of others. As critic Chris Berry notes, the film embodies “a documentary of ghosts,” where the city speaks through its ruins and absences.

Across these works, Jia's documentaries act as both complement and counterpoint to his fiction features. They reveal his belief that realism is not merely an aesthetic choice but a moral stance: to film is to bear witness, to preserve fragments of truth against the erasures of progress.

Negotiating the State: Censorship, Strategy, and Cultural Citizenship

To discuss Jia Zhangke without addressing censorship would be to overlook one of the defining tensions of his career. The director's trajectory—from underground independence to official recognition—reflects the delicate balancing act faced by artists working within China's authoritarian system.

During the 1990s and early 2000s, Jia's films were produced without government approval, circulated through international festivals, and widely praised abroad but rarely shown domestically. This status as an “underground” filmmaker positioned him at odds with the state but also limited his audience at home.

With *The World* (2004), Jia made the strategic decision to seek official sanction. This shift was not a capitulation but a tactical manoeuvre. “I want Chinese people to see

Chinese stories,” he remarked in interviews, arguing that global acclaim alone could not justify isolation from the domestic public. The film’s setting—a Beijing theme park filled with miniature replicas of world monuments—was itself a metaphor for globalization under surveillance: the world experienced as spectacle within national boundaries.

By the time of *A Touch of Sin* (2013), Jia had become an internationally recognized auteur whose work the state could not easily suppress without embarrassment. The film’s four interlocking stories—each based on real incidents of social violence—constitute perhaps the boldest critique of inequality and corruption ever to pass Chinese censorship. Its approval was widely interpreted as a sign of the authorities’ confidence in managing dissent through containment. Yet the film’s subsequent domestic withdrawal from cinemas after a brief run revealed the continuing fragility of this balance.

In interviews, Jia has described his role as that of a “citizen-artist,” committed to dialogue rather than confrontation. He insists that cinema can act as a mirror for society, encouraging self-reflection without direct polemic. This pragmatic idealism sets him apart from both dissident and propagandist traditions. Where earlier generations of filmmakers defined themselves through opposition or service to the state, Jia occupies a liminal space of critical engagement—neither inside nor outside, but perpetually negotiating the border.

His establishment of the Pingyao International Film Festival in 2017 further demonstrates this position. By creating a platform for independent voices within

China, Jia has effectively institutionalized a form of semi-autonomous cultural exchange. The festival’s motto, “Year Zero,” signals his belief that Chinese cinema must continually reinvent itself—remembering the past yet refusing both nostalgia and obedience.

Music, Pop Culture, and the Soundtrack of Modernity

From the karaoke bars of *Xiao Wu* to the disco sequences of *Platform* and the techno beats of *The World*, music plays a central role in Jia Zhangke’s depiction of modern China. Popular songs function not merely as background but as emotional and historical markers, charting the evolution of collective desire from the 1980s to the present.

In *Platform*, set during the 1980s reforms, the protagonists perform in a traveling theatre troupe that gradually transitions from revolutionary propaganda to pop entertainment. The shift from patriotic anthems to imported disco tracks encapsulates the ideological transformation of the nation. As scholar Jason McGrath observes, “The popular song becomes the soundtrack of economic reform itself—a vehicle of liberation and alienation at once.”

Similarly, *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) immerses viewers in the sonic detritus of early-2000s China: pop idols on television, jingles from advertisements, fragments of radio chatter. These auditory layers create a sense of perpetual distraction, mirroring the protagonists’ drifting attention in an age of consumer spectacle.

Jia’s use of music often carries ironic undertones. In *Still Life*, a scene of workers dancing to the sentimental tune “Take Care” contrasts the tenderness of melody with the

violence of demolition around them. In *Mountains May Depart* (2015), the Pet Shop Boys' "Go West" becomes a recurring motif, transforming from a symbol of youthful optimism to one of exile and loss. By the film's futuristic final act, the song plays over Zhao Tao's solitary dance in the snow—a haunting echo of globalization's unfulfilled promises.

Composer Lim Giong, a long-time collaborator, contributes electronic soundscapes that blend ambient textures with folk motifs. His scores function as bridges between old and new, embodying the sonic hybridity of modern China. The combination of electronic pulse and traditional melody mirrors the coexistence of mechanization and memory in Jia's imagery.

Through music, Jia stages what could be called the acoustics of modernization: the collision between imported culture and local sentiment, between nostalgia and futurism. His soundtracks do not merely accompany images—they articulate the invisible emotional life of an era.

The Politics of Time: Nostalgia, Futurity and Human Scale

A recurring theme across Jia's filmography is time—not merely as chronology but as lived experience, historical consciousness, and moral weight. His narratives unfold over decades, tracing the slow erosion of relationships against the relentless acceleration of society.

Platform charts the transformation of a provincial troupe from 1979 to 1990, mirroring the nation's shift from collectivism to individualism. *Mountains May Depart* extends this logic further, dividing its story

into three segments—1999, 2014, and 2025—each shot in a different aspect ratio. This formal device makes visible the contraction and expansion of time: the first segment's boxed frame evokes the limitations of the past, the final segment's widescreen suggests openness tinged with alienation.

Jia's fascination with temporal layering aligns with philosopher Henri Bergson's idea of "durée"—time as qualitative flow rather than measurable sequence. His long takes allow viewers to inhabit duration, to feel the weight of waiting, of change too gradual to perceive. Yet his sudden leaps across years or decades remind us that personal time is always entangled with historical rupture.

This temporal consciousness carries political implications. Against the state's narratives of progress and modernization, Jia offers an alternative historiography grounded in memory, loss, and continuity. His films insist that development cannot erase experience, that every demolished neighbourhood and forgotten worker contributes to the nation's moral archive.

Rather than nostalgia in the sentimental sense, Jia's temporal politics resemble what Svetlana Boym calls "reflective nostalgia"—a critical engagement with the past that recognizes its distance while mourning its disappearance. The ruins that populate his frames are not symbols of decay but of endurance, reminders that history persists even in fragments.

Conclusion

Across nearly three decades of filmmaking, Jia Zhangke has constructed what might be called an emotional geography of contemporary China. From Fenyang's dusty

streets to the neon corridors of Beijing's amusement parks, from the displaced communities of the Three Gorges to the imagined future of *Mountains May Depart*, his cinema charts the contradictions of a society in perpetual transformation.

Jia's China is not the monumental nation of propaganda nor the exoticized landscape of international art cinema. It is a lived, unstable reality—intimate yet vast, material yet spectral. His characters, caught between memory and modernization, reveal the psychic costs of a society hurtling toward the future without reckoning with its past.

Formally, Jia has traversed the spectrum from neorealist observation to digital experimentation, from underground independence to institutional engagement. Yet the moral consistency of his project remains intact: to record the human consequences of economic change, to find beauty within desolation, and to maintain empathy amid dislocation.

Critic Tony Rayns once described Jia as “the conscience of Chinese cinema,” a phrase that captures his role as both witness and participant in national history. His films remind viewers that cinema's truest function may not be to explain China but to feel it—to

register the vibrations of life as it unfolds between progress and loss.

In the end, the “idea of China” in Jia's work is not a fixed image but a process of becoming. It is the movement of people and emotions through space and time, the rhythm of demolition and construction, the persistence of dignity within displacement. Through his meticulous observation and quiet lyricism, Jia Zhangke has turned the local into the universal, the ephemeral into the enduring—a cinema of humanity that transcends borders even as it remains rooted in the dust of Shanxi.

Filmography

Films by Jia Zhangke:

Xiao Wu (1997)

Platform (2000)

Unknown Pleasures (2002)

The World (2004)

Still Life (2006)

Useless (2007)

24 City (2008)

I Wish I Knew (2010)

A Touch of Sin (2013)

Mountains May Depart (2015)

Ash Is Purest White (2018)

Caught by the Tides (2024)

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