

Not a Simple 'Anthropocene' Story in Contemporary China:
Unveiling the Entanglement of Chinese Social and Environmental Issues

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Abstract

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I developed this thesis, that addresses current social issues and environmental issues in contemporary China, in response to the pursuit of economic development and urbanization, before and after the political-ideological reorientation of the Chinese Communist Party led by Deng Xiaoping and his Reform and Openness policy at the end of the 1970s. I explore the cinematic reflection of environmental problems and social issues in three films of Jia Zhangke, a famous sixth-generation director who adopts realistic aesthetic and artistic pursuit in his films. My reflection is accompanied by a critical discourse analysis of newspaper articles from People's Daily. Through these two methods, I examine the reality of contemporary China through an economic, cultural, political, social and natural lens to shed light on the root causes of various social and environmental issues in contemporary China.

Guided by Anthropocene thinking, I engage in a discussion on tensions within human-nature relationships in China. This research introduces a way of understanding the human-nature relationship within the Anthropocene framework by considering elements including the social structure of human society, the social stratification of different social groups, and the ultimate hegemony of powerholders. In this thesis, I argue that proletariats and ordinary Chinese people in contemporary China who struggle with their personal existential crises do not have the social and political power to make changes to their social reality, neither do they have the power to interfere with the decisions of powerholders, where these decisions are influential in causing social changes, changes to Chinese people's daily life, changes of Chinese natural landscapes and the human-nature relationship in China.

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List of Abbreviations

Brother Mark (Protagonist Xiaoma Ge in *Still Life*, Cast by Zhou Lin)

Chinese Communist Party (CCP or Party)

Cui (Protagonist Cui Minliang in *Platform*, cast by Wang Hongwei)

Dongming (Protagonist Wang Dongming in *Still Life*, cast by Wang Hongwei)

Eryong (Protagonist Yao Eryong in *Platform*, cast by Wang Bo)

Er Guniang (Protagonist Er Guniang in *The World*, cast by Liang Jingdong)

Erxiao (Protagonist Erxiao in *The World*, cast by Ji Shuai)

Guo Bin (Protagonist Guo Bin in *Still Life*, Cast by Li Zhubing)

Qun (Protagonist Liao Aqun in *The World*, cast by Huang Yiqun)

Special Economic Zones (SEZs)

Sanming (Protagonist Han Sanming in *Platform* and *Still Life*, cast by Han Sanming)

Sanlai (Protagonist Sanlai in *The World*, cast by Wang Hongwei)

Shen Hong (Protagonist Shen Hong in *Still Life*, cast by Zhao Tao)

Tao (Protagonist Zhao Xiaotao in *The World*, cast by Zhao Tao)

Taisheng (Protagonist Chen Taisheng in *The World*, cast by Chen Taisheng)

Yin (Protagonist Yin Ruijuan in *Platform*, cast by Zhao Tao)

Zhang (Protagonist Zhang Jun in *Platform*, cast by Liang Jingdong)

Zhong (Protagonist Zhong Ping in *Platform*, cast by Yang Tianyi)

Chapter 1 Introduction

When discussing Chinese films, terms such as the fifth-generation and the sixth-generation are used as neologisms to refer to two classes of directors who graduated from the Beijing Film Academy after the end of the Cultural Revolution around the 1980s (Zhu, 2013). The fifth-generation is the first class of Chinese directors from the mainland to initiate a concerted and collective effort to bring Chinese cinema to international attention. The sixth-generation, in contrast, while murky and controversial, is an umbrella term that encompasses a diverse group of young filmmakers with varying aesthetic styles, subject matter preferences, and cultural stances. The fifth-generation directors endeavour to create films through solemn reflections on Chinese history, or from another perspective, creating cinema following the Chinese Communist Party (hereafter, the CCP)'s agenda to emphasize a sense of patriotism. In contrast, the sixth generation has exhibited a keen concern about the social transformation of contemporary China after implementing the policy of Deng Xiaoping, "Reform and Openness" starting from the late 1970s. This policy introduced the neoliberal market into China (Zhu, 2013), which has revolutionized the political, cultural and social landscape of China by mingling the socialist ideologies of Mao's regime with the force of global capitalism brought in by Deng's policy. In this case, the sixth generation of filmmakers "bear the indelible imprint of the revolutionary heritage of the socialist past, but their coming-of-age experiences were highlighted by forced exposure to China's rapid modernization process" (Zhu, 2013, p. 88).

Within such a complicated social context in contemporary China, the new documentary movement with respect to the realism school of cinema emerges in revolt to the socialist cinema that was prevalent in previous decades. This movement was largely promoted by the sixth-generation directors who attempt to distinguish themselves from a form of post-socialism (the fifth-generation) by sticking to a form of *true to life* realism in their cinema. Realism is a general term referring to a tendency of understanding cinema from a certain perspective, which Giannetti (2014/1987) argues that "realistic films attempt to reproduce the surface of reality with a minimum of distortion [and] realists try to preserve the illusion that their film world is unmanipulated" (p. 2).

However, the documentary impulse and the form of *true to life* realism in cinema and the self-banishment from mainstream ideology in filmmaking puts the sixth-generation directors in a position of revolt with the Chinese Communist Party, which makes cinema produced by the sixth-generation considered "underground films" and "independent films",

which have little access to commercial interests, and some of these films are not allowed to be screened in mainland China (Pickowicz & Zhang, 2006, p.26).

Jia Zhangke: Realism and Artistic Pursuit in his films

My research focuses on a leading sixth-generation director Jia Zhangke (hereafter Jia) because he integrates both realistic aesthetic and artistic pursuit to the greatest extent in his films and he attempts to show the dramatic changes of China under the political and social transformation through the lens of marginalized groups such as migrant workers and prostitutes in his films. Most importantly, his different films are interconnected and have a high degree of consistency regarding cinematic narrative and cinematography, which is different from other sixth-generation directors. This unique character of his films allows me to analyze his films in a consistent and developing manner in response to my research questions, which will be mentioned in the section below.

Born in 1970 in the Fenyang city in Shanxi province, Jia started making films in the 1990s as a student at the Beijing Film Academy. His first film, *Xiaoshan Going Home* (小山回家) was made in 1995 when he was a student at university. The realistic aesthetic in this film cemented him as a sixth-generation director (Zhu, 2013, p. 90), and this characteristic also has made his cinematic content being politically sensitive. Starting from 1995 to 2004, Jia's films were not allowed to be screened in mainland China due to the censorship of the CCP. In 2004, Jia reconciled with the Chinese State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (ZhongGuo GuangDianzhongju 中国广电总局) and Jia's "credentials as a director" have been admitted and restored by this department¹ (Jaffee, 2004). After 2004, Jia gradually earned national attention in mainland China as a filmmaker, and now "Jia has been displaying what can be described as a polymathic nature: he is a film producer, occasional actor, initiator of a film festival, lecturer in film and art at the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing and the founding partner of four different film companies" (Mello, 2019, p. 18). Up to 2020, Jia has directed 2 short films, 6 documentaries and 10 films.

¹ In order to obtain government recognition and permission to show their films in the nation's theatres, Chinese filmmakers must fulfil several requirements: they must 1). purchase a quota number from a state-run studio, 2). submit both a plot synopsis and the completed film to government, and 3). not make the film public until the censors' approval is secured. Filmmakers who fail on any of these counts can expect that their film will be banned and they themselves forbidden to make any more films in China until further notice. Jia's films have received a warm welcome at international festivals but failed to be screened in domestic market due to the unfulfillment of requirements mentioned above. Starting from 2003, Jia has started to consider in developing his national influence and he reached out to the CCP in order to seek formal approval for his films. His efforts negotiating with the CCP is aiming to allow domestic audiences to see his films. Meanwhile, he attempted to not make compromises in his films under such a condition but rather he is looking for a resolution.

Film theorist Cecilia Mello (2019), in her newly published book named *The Cinema of Jia Zhangke: Realism and Memory in Chinese Film*, has made a substantial contribution to analyzing realism in Jia's films. Mello (2019) argues that starting from Jia's time as a student in film theory class at university, he was impacted by French film theorist, André Bazin's (1960) view of cinema as the art of reality. Other than that, the biography of Jia also plays an essential role in the realism of his films because Jia (2017) claims that his background growing up in the backwater town of Fenyang in Shanxi province has a significant impact on his cinema. For example, Jia's films have included many repeated features such as migrant workers working in coal mines and factories, the demolition of buildings, and various kinds of public performances that are drawn from Jia's experiences and observations (Jia, 2017, 67-69).

Jia's directorial choices have also contributed to the realism in his films. According to Zhu (2013) and Mello (2019), Jia's directorial style was established in his early career as a director and Jia prefers long and medium shots, slow camera motion, fixed natural positions, natural lighting and shooting in real locations with semi or non-professional actors and actresses. Besides, Jia intends to portray the reality in life through the seemingly unedited roughness in his films instead of having beautiful cinematic images, where he wishes to deliver a sense of unease to audiences in reconnecting their life with the cinematic content.

Other than the directorial style Jia adopted, Jia also utilized popular music, relying on its affective nature as a form of cinematographic language that offer his audiences a space in which to contemplate themselves and their relations to the ever-changing society. Jia has utilized a variety of Chinese popular music including lively rock music and sentimental pop songs to signify an interweaving of existential states and emotional appeal, reflecting the social reality of individuals under different social contexts. Moreover, the popular music used in Jia's films is highly contextualized and reflect an accurate depiction of the popular culture in a specific social context of China. In general, the combination of documentary realism shown through his directorial style and the usages of Chinese popular music in his films delivers a nuanced and non-threatening form of the realist cinematic language which appeals to and connects to audiences by drawing them back to a specific social context of China.

Jia (2017) is dedicated to delivering a sense of reality in his films through many techniques mentioned, but he is well aware of the fact that the absolute objectivity in films does not exist and realism in cinema is a form of intentional construction. Even though cinema delivers a dominant mode of artistic expression, the realism in Jia's films allows audiences and scholars to take a peek at the world from Jia's point of view. The entanglement between artistic pursuit and realism in Jia's films allows his oeuvres to reflect what is real in life. Through the

combination of these two elements, it shows Jia's ability to weave the two harmoniously into a new cinematic language that creates a unique style in Jia's films.

With the understanding of the real as an aesthetic concept, Jia has more creative freedom in his filmmaking, where he has intentionally included surrealistic elements in his films. Surrealism, originally an artistic and literary movement founded by André Breton in 1924, now reflects a way of philosophical thinking widely accepted in different kinds of artistic expressions. Surrealism embraces irrationality and relinquishes instrumental reason. Adopting surrealism in cinema, filmmakers attempt to critically present a lucid clarity about relationships-between humans and humans and things-prevails (Graubard, 2007, p. 304). In Jia's film, the first instance of surrealistic element occurs in *The World*, which contains several short-animated sequences that represent the characters' inner fantasies. *Still Life* continued the trend of including surrealistic elements by incorporating scenes such as a tightrope walker walking on whose high wire spans the Three Gorges. Through these visual representations, Jia conveys his understanding that the real can be surreal, and vice versa.

Literature Review

As my research focuses on the cinema of Jia, I present a basic understanding of how many other scholars have contributed to the discussion of Jia's films. I have observed that many other scholars focus on the urbanization and modernization process of China shown in Jia's films. Zhen (2007) argues that there is a link between the cinematic depictions of the massive spatial alterations of Chinese cities and the emergence of the sixth-generation directors. Zhen (2007) also specifies that the ongoing demolition of traditional architectures in Beijing to make way for city infrastructures, corporate buildings, and shopping malls under the pursuit of market economy and the global capitalism are shown in many films of sixth-generation directors including Jia's film *Xiao Wu* (1997). In the wake of China's urbanization, Chinese people's daily lives have undergone dramatic changes and it has led to a sense of nostalgia among Chinese people, which "actively reflects upon the past, and lingers on the pain and loss aroused by the remainder of the past, including ruined homes, broken familial connection, and uprooted cultural identity" (Yao, 2017, p.85).

The process of urbanization and the trend of following global capitalism in China has not only caused changes to the daily life of Chinese people, but it has also led to negative consequences on local ecologies. Silbergeld (2009) analyzes Jia Zhangke's film *The World* and he recognizes that the land mass of the World Park takes 115 acres. In such a huge commercial park, it provides thousands of job opportunities and engages in a highly profitable business (p.

121). However, this project occupies a large area of agricultural land, which caused the loss of arable land and “China, a huge grain exporter in 1990, is a net importer today” (p. 120). Other than that, manufacturing a project like the World Park requires various kinds of natural resources including the use of concrete, which is drawn from the sandy lakebed of Lake Poyang, hence, causing the shrinking of its lakebed.

Another scholar Zhang (2009) also mentions that he notices the disappearance of nature in Jia’s films. This disappearance of natural landscapes in rural China was replaced by other scenes including “the coalmines operated beneath the farming land or in the dreary hills surrounding the village where the young performers stay, and the railroad passing through the barren and wild mountains, all suggest that the rural landscape is being gradually industrialized and thus has lost much of its power to naturalize beyond history” (p. 135). Zhang (2009) also notes a different type of natural landscape in *Still Life*, in which the ideal beauty of nature in the Three Gorges region was once printed on the ten-yuan bill of the Chinese currency, as mentioned by demolition workers in the film. The contradiction of the representation of natural beauty and its destruction as a result of the Three Gorges Dam construction deliver a sense of unspeakable poignancy and an increasing sense of nostalgia. These two types of natural landscapes’ marginalization and disappearance shown in Jia’s films have reflected a harsh reality in contemporary China, where the modernization and urbanization of the landscape have destroyed the beauty of nature.

Nature is not the only object being exploited in contemporary China, migrant workers as proletariats are mostly exploited by capitalists during the process of commodification in Chinese society. Wagner (2013) identifies various kinds of personal struggles of migrant workers. On the one hand, migrant workers are mostly disconnected from urban life and this disconnection is because they are stereotyped as uneducated, rude, and uncivilised by city residents. This is considered a lack of “素质, Suzhi”, where “Suzhi” refers to having ephemeral qualities of civility, self-discipline, and modernity. The stereotypes of migrant workers discredit their good nature and further reduces the capital value of their labor in the market economy and contributes to their poverty-stricken reality. On the other hand, the personal struggles of migrant workers are further caught between the continuous transformation of Chinese society and individuals’ constant reorientation, where such reorientation is helpless because workers, especially migrant workers as a marginalized group, are always oppressed by capitalists in various ways. Wang (2009) applies the Marxist perspective to understand the exploitation of labourers in an increasingly capitalist China, in which he explores the life of workers in manufacturing factories, where labour workers are being oppressed with capitalists’

ceaseless drive to gain surplus value. Under the capitalist model, labour is devalued and depreciated. Not only are labourers dehumanized, but they are also trapped in the polluted landscape of industrial areas. Wang (2009) states, “in a rush to ... urbanization and in its quest of new wealth and power, the questions of community, human dignity, equality, nature and human habitat are thrown to the winds” (p. 169).

Ecocinema Studies and Anthropocene

The fury of China’s urbanization, modernization, globalization, and the market-driven economic boom in the post-Mao-Deng era are the primary causes of social changes and the changes in the Chinese landscape, as shown in Jia’s films and many other oeuvres of sixth-generation directors. The depiction of Chinese social changes in cinema, as a form of artistic expression, brings in the questions of understanding the entangled relationship among arts, humans and the physical world. Ecocinema studies scholar Ivakhiv (2013) has discussed that film philosophers have constantly asked ontological and epistemological questions about cinema: “1). what is cinema, and what are we in relationship to it? 2). how are both changing in a mutually constitutive dynamic? 3). what is the reality that has been not only represented but thoroughly transformed by the moving image” (p. 245)? These questions consider cinema, humans and the reality as intertwining and influencing each other in a unique way. Ivakhiv (2013) argues that the changes occurring in cinema also reflected the undergoing profound relationship between humans and the Earth. Considering the realistic aesthetic of Jia’s cinema aforementioned, Jia’s filmmaking reveals an accurate reflection of the interaction between “three ecologies of the earth world – the material, the social and the perceptual” (Ivakhiv, 2013, p. 34), where the material refers to the real world or the Earth, the social refers to the human society, and the perceptual refers to the representations of the Earth and human society in cinema when thinking of cinema as an anthropomorphic, geomorphic and biomorphic machine provides a semblance version of the real world.

The change of the Chinese landscape under the social transformation shown in Jia’s films reflect the real changes in China to a certain extent based on cinema providing a semblance of the real world as Ivakhiv (2013) argues, and the realistic aesthetic adopted in Jia’s films. Many scholars in my literature review, suggest that the rush towards urbanization and modernization has destroyed natural landscapes in China and the question of a harmonious human-nature relationship becomes insignificant.

These real changes of Chinese landscapes align with the concept of the Anthropocene as formulated by Paul Crutzen (2002) as the epoch in which significant human impacts on the

biosphere, ecology, and geology, separate the current “human-dominant” epoch from the epoch of Holocene. More importantly, all the things that the Anthropocene implies go beyond geology, the Anthropocene reveals an in-depth social-political importance of seeing human beings as a species in the world; and we as human beings have drastically impacted the landscape of the Earth in a negative way causing global ecological degradations and worldwide environmental crises. The concept of Anthropocene asks important questions about humans and our relationship with the Earth, which an environmental historian and historical geographer Jason Moore (2016) considers the Anthropocene as a worthy point of departure to pose questions like: “how do humans fit within the web of life?” (p. 2). Moore (2016) further questions what kind of human activities have brought a damaging impact on the Earth. Moore (2016) introduces the idea of the Capitalocene, which includes capitalism when thinking of the human-nature relationship. Moore argues that capitalism is the major force imposing relentless patterns of violence on nature and humans. The idea of the Capitalocene considers nature as a form of “cheap nature” (p. 8), which portrays nature as something to be exploited for capital accumulation. In Moore’s words, capitalism is the way of organizing the world including nature as a form of exploitable resource and the human society (classes, empires, markets). These systems organize how the majority of human beings with lower socio-economic status live their lives and how they interact with nature.

Under the ongoing discussions on the topic of the Anthropocene, it seems to me that the changes of the natural landscapes due to the reckless pursuit of urbanization and modernization shows the “Anthropocencical”² dimension of contemporary Chinese society. In 2006, Canadian photographer Edward Burtynsky and film director Jennifer Baichwal produced a documentary together titled *Manufactured Landscapes*, which features the landscape in China as an immensely man-made “manufactured landscape”. The idea of manufactured landscapes could be well reflected in Jia’s cinema through the realistic depiction of 1). the construction of the most famous man-made physical structure in China, the Three Gorges Dam, and 2). the massive scale of the demolition of traditional buildings for modernization and urbanization, and 3). other human-directed events shaping the landscape including coal mining. All of these events could be considered serious human activities at the expense of nature and ecology. Moore’s idea of the Capitalocene further positions capitalism as a major force oppressing nature and human society. In Jia’s films, he has also paid attention to marginalized

² This word “Anthropocencical” is an adjective introduced by me in describing the current situation the contemporary Chinese society in the thread of Anthropocene discussion.

groups, such as migrant workers, in contemporary Chinese society, which he shows the oppression of working classes by people in powerful positions, especially capitalists, in his cinematic contents. That is to say, the workers are exploited by capitalists and powerholders. In this case, the changes of landscapes in contemporary China and the personal existential crises of marginalized groups shown in Jia's films can be considered as by-products of capitalism.

Research Question

Following my interest in understanding both social issues and ecological issues in contemporary China as reflected by Jia Zhangke's oeuvres with the thread of Anthropocene and Capitalocene, this thesis proposes to explore the changes to Chinese landscapes and the social life of Chinese people influenced by the massive social and political transformation in China. My research question is: how does Jia Zhangke engage environmental and ecological issues with social issues in his films to present the anxieties and concerns of current Chinese society? Four sub-research questions follow: 1). how does the massive social and political transformation in contemporary China lead to the changes of Chinese landscape and the changes in the daily life of Chinese people? 2) how do Jia Zhangke's films collectively reflect these changes? 3). how do marginalized groups of people in Jia Zhangke's films respond to such changes of Chinese landscapes? 4). what do different forms of being, including marginalized groups of people, nature, people with power, and the Chinese Communist party show in his films represent respectively?

Methodology

The sampling method of my research is "purposive sampling", which is defined as "the way that the researcher samples must be tied to their objectives" (Palys, 2008, p. 697). The identified corpus of my study is Jia Zhangke's films, and the selection of films is based on their cinematic narratives, their connection with my research topic, and the cinematic representation of Chinese landscape depicted in the film. As Jia Zhangke has produced various kinds of films including feature films, documentaries and short films, my selection of his films is limited to a particular genre, which is feature films. In this case, it is easier for me to maintain the consistency when comparing different films of Jia.

I have selected *Platform* (2000)³, *The World* (2005)⁴, and *Still Life* (2006) as my research corpus based on the criteria mentioned above. *Platform* belongs to a famous series of Jia's named his underground "hometown trilogy" (Zhu, 2013, p. 90), where this film is set in Jia's hometown Fenyang, and the narrative in this film takes place from the end of the 1970s to the beginning of the 1990s. The film revolves around a local theatre troupe in Fenyang, and it mainly discusses the stories of the young performers Cui Mingliang, Yin Ruijuan, Zhang Jun, and Zhong Ping in the midst of changing times. In its cinematic narrative and cinematography, *Platform* perfectly depicts the transformation of Chinese society under the lens of the theatre troupe after the Reform and the Openness policy being issued by the CCP.

The World is another film that I selected, and it was shot in the actual theme park named Beijing World Park in Beijing. This film mainly tells a story revolving around two employees in the World Park, a performer named Tao and a security guard named Taisheng, and this film also showcases the life stories of other marginalized people, such as Taisheng's fellow migrants Er Guniang and Sanlai, which both of them work as construction workers in Beijing. Many details of this film depict the personal existential crises of different social groups, which reflects various social issues in the process of urbanization and modernization in China.

Still Life is an important film of Jia's, shot in Fengjie, a small town on the Yangtze River. This film showcases the preparation of the Three Gorges Dam construction including the demolition of the ancient city Fengjie and the forced relocation of Fengjie citizens. The main cinematic narrative in this film features two protagonists, Sanming, a migrant worker who travels from Shanxi to Fengjie in search of his wife and daughter, and Shenhong, a nurse who travels from Shanxi to Fengjie in search of her husband Guo Bin. This film covertly presents the entanglement of the ecological issues and social issues in Fengjie in the early 2000s through the lens of two protagonists.

These three films are selected not only based on the criteria mentioned above, but they also depict the ultimate value of adopting the realistic aesthetic of Jia's cinema. Jia adopts a documentary style when directing these films by using either non-professional actors or semi-professional actors, shooting these films with natural lighting and depicting these narratives in real locations. Other films being produced later than *Still Life*, including *24 Cities* (2008), *A*

³ *Platform* has two versions in terms of its length, which are 154 minutes for the shorter version and 193 minutes for the longer version. Due to the fact that only a short version is available for me, I choose the 154 minutes version for my semiotic analysis.

⁴ *The World* has two versions in terms of its length, which are 108 minutes for the shorter version and 133 minutes for the longer version. I choose the longer version of *The World* because of the richness in its cinematic content.

Touch of Sins (2013), *Mountains May Depart* (2015) and *Ashes is Purest White* (2018) started to include professional actors and actresses. In my opinion, such inclusion in Jia's film, to a certain extent, deconstructs the realistic aesthetic of Jia's cinema. In this case, I decided to exclude these films in my research. However, other films of Jia such as *Xiao Wu* are briefly mentioned in the below section in order to understand Jia's films deeply in a broader context.

By focusing on Jia's films including *Platform*, *The World* and *Still Life*, I adopt the qualitative research method of the semiotic analysis for analyzing three films selected. However, I also consider the necessity to understand public discussions around economic development, urbanization, modernization, globalization, and environmental problems in contemporary Chinese society under a broader sociohistorical context, so I adopted critical discourse analysis to analyze Chinese newspaper articles in order to grasp a basic understanding of these public discussions in contemporary Chinese society and such analysis helped me to better analyze the three selected films by situating them in their social contexts.

For critical discourse analysis, I have selected and analyzed 51 newspaper articles in total, in which all of these articles were published by People's Daily and they were drawn from online People's Daily Graphic Database. People's Daily, as the state-run news agency, is one of the largest newspaper publishers in China and it is an official "voice" of the Central Committee of the CCP. I chose to analyze articles from one newspaper agency to maintain consistency and I chose articles from People's Daily as they represent the political agenda of the CCP in China.

The selection of newspaper articles is based on four essential keywords including 1). the reform and opening up, 2). urbanization, 3). migrant workers, and 4). the Three Gorges Dam. All selected articles were originally released between 1955 to 2006. Having such a wide timeline allowed me to thoroughly examine the political and societal changes in contemporary China. Situating the three selected films within the broad social-political-historical context of China, it provided me the possibility to sort out the causality between the CCP's policies and its influences on the social transformation in Chinese society, which helped me to answer all of my research questions.

Following closely after the critical discourse analysis, I conducted a semiotic analysis of three selected films. The semiotic analysis in my research focuses on both the cinematic narrative and the cinematographic language of each selected film. My analysis of the cinematographic language in Jia's films specifically pays attention to signs reflecting my research topics and these signs include the cinematic representations of landscape, the facial expressions and gestures of the films' protagonists, the background scenes, the behaviours

patterns of protagonists, and the conversations between characters. Not all visual signs and audio signs are analyzed in this research; signs are selected for analysis based on their relevancies and connections with my research questions. In addition, the analysis of signs is organized into different themes. Through the process of categorizing and grouping different themes, I deliver a small scale of comparative analysis within the semiotics analysis to compare and contrast different themes. Through this comparative analysis, I hope to provide an in-depth discussion responding to my major research question.

Chapter Breakdown

With respect to the ongoing political and societal changes in contemporary China, I organize my chapters in this thesis following the linear timeline of the socio-historical development in contemporary China. In Chapter 2, I offer historical background of China through examining the policies of Mao during his era and the political-ideological reorientation of the CCP led by Deng around the end of the 1970s, where the reform and openness policy issued by Deng revolutionizes the political, social and cultural landscape in China. This chapter mainly shows the reality of the massive political and social transformation in China. Chapter 3 continues to examine the Reform and Openness policy and I focus on its influence on Chinese economic development and the transition of Chinese cultural life in an increasingly globalized and capitalized Chinese society from the 1980s to mid-2000s. In this chapter, I discuss my sub-research question and consider the influence of social changes on the daily life of Chinese people at a material level and a cultural level. In Chapter 4, I focus on the influences of social change on individuals while specifically focusing on the existential crises of different marginalized groups of people who are shown as protagonists in Jia's films, and how these cinematic stories reflect the social reality of these groups. This chapter provides a more in-depth answer to the first question considering the changes of the daily life of Chinese people from a social perspective, and it also offers a partial answer to the fourth sub-research question. Chapter 5 focuses on the rush of urbanization and its influence on the cultural heritage and ancient cityscapes in China, its influence on nature and how these changes of Chinese landscapes have influenced Chinese citizens leading to a sense of nostalgia by reminiscing the loss of their original homes and hometowns. This chapter responds to the first and fourth sub-research questions in focusing on the changes of Chinese landscape. Chapter 6 concludes this thesis and I attempt to define the social structure of contemporary Chinese society by reconnecting the discussion to the concepts of Anthropocene and Capitalocene, and by consulting other important concepts including imperialism, capitalism and feudalism, in order

to respond to my major research question. At the end of this thesis, I briefly discuss the environmental policies in China by consulting 3 outlines of the Five-Year Plan published by the CCP covering from 2006 to 2020. Finally, I compare the environmental policies of the CCP with the reality of environmental situations in China to reflect the primary cause of these existing problems in China.

Chapter 2 From Mao to Deng: The Revolutionary Transformation in China

Mao's Era: Social Unrests for More than a Decade

After the establishment of the new Chinese Central Government in 1949, the prior task of the CCP was to reconstruct the economy after four decades of social unrest and destruction in the country (Dillon, 2010, p. 283). With the embryonic government, the CCP had started the process of central planning to re-establish the economic system following the previous Soviet Union model. The First Five-Year Plan in China was designed for the period between 1953 to 1957 and it was regarded as the only plan following the natural economic value and therefore is regarded as a success.

Following the successful implementation of the First Five Year Plan, the CCP leadership headed by Mao had more confidence than ever before in pushing forward the economic development in China at a rapid speed. With this ideology, Mao has considered the condition in China was ripe for a great leap forward, therefore he adopted a bold economic experiment from the Soviet Union during 1958 to 1962 with setting up overly-optimistic industrial and agricultural goals to achieve, in which this experiment wished to use China's vast population to rapidly transform the country and its agrarian economy to a modern, industrialized communist utopia (Dillon, 2010, p. 305).

During the Great Leap Forward, Mao explains that the population of 600 million Chinese citizens are extremely poor. He argues that it is a good thing because poverty pushes people to change, to act and to stage a revolution. In this case, Mao considers the eradication of poverty as the major motivation for Chinese people to work effortlessly to achieve economic goals. Another concept brought out by Mao Zedong is called “主观能动性 (Zhuguan Nengdongxing)”, translated as the subjective initiative. This emphasizes the belief in human power and human capability to change the adverse physical environment. To further elaborate on the concept of the subjective initiative introduced by Mao, a poem written by Mao during an onsite visit to Wuhan and the Yangtze River area in 1956, specify Mao's ambitions to change the physical environment and natural landscapes in Yangtze River areas. He writes:

“Great plans are afoot:

A bridge will fly to span the north and south⁵,

Turning a deep chasm into a thoroughfare;

⁵ This poem is named Swimming—to the tune of *Shui Diao Ge Tou*, which was first published in the magazine Poetry in 1956.

⁶ This sentence refers to the Wuhan Yangtze River bridge under construction in 1956, completed in 1957.

Walls of stone will stand upstream to the west
 To hold back Wushan's clouds and rain
 Till a smooth lake rises in the narrow gorges.
 The mountain goddess if she is still there
 Will marvel at a world so changed⁷” (Zhou, n.d.).

This poem is highly quoted by others in newspaper articles to express Mao’s anthropocentric attitude towards nature and his ambition to conquer the Yangtze River. This anthropocentric concept not only shows Mao’s desire to conquer the Yangtze River and build the hydropower facility, but it is also reflected through many other areas including agriculture and industry. Since the concept of the subjective initiative was highly promoted in China among people through political propaganda, Chinese poet Guo Moruo wrote a poem named War on Earth, as an excessive form of flattery for Mao, published on People’s Daily in 1958. It writes:

“Many of them [soldiers] take off the armour and return to home for farming,
 No, they are changing the war field, starting a war on Earth.
 Chairman Mao used to say: we need to conquer the surface of the Earth,
 and then move to outer space.
 Such a broad and endless war field has been shown in front of our Chinese people.
 The total territory (or under control) of P.R.C is 10.45 million square kilometres,
 but the farming land is less than 20% of the total territory.
 We have a large population and the average farming land distribution is higher than
 Japan and Britain.
 But it is far lower than the United States and the Soviet Union.
 We need to develop the underdeveloped land,
 South to Hainan island, North to the riverside of the Amur River,
 West to the world roof of Pamir Mountains,
 Doing farming at the bottom of oceans and the top of the mountains,
 The great dessert will be managed to turn into good farming lands.
 The power of 600 million Chinese people can remove mountains and fill up seas.
 ...

⁷“Walls of stone ... so changed” refers to the plan of building a massive dam and a reservoir for conserving the water and generating the electricity. The upstream in the Yangtze River will be turned into a smooth lake because of the Three Gorges project.

Besides, there are unlimited treasures in the underground world.
 We also have to open the underground warehouse to make the treasures useful.
 Comrades, the trumpet of technical revolution blew,
 We have to march towards science and technology,
 Steel production has to catch up with Britain in five years,
 Science and technology must catch up with the world average in the next few years.
 The working people throughout China are fighting for upward social mobility.
 It has been seen with the rapid progress in the production of agriculture and industry.
 This progressing situation is like the firing of nuclear power, which chain reactions
 are erupting everywhere (See the entire Poem in Appendix C)” (Guo, 1958).

This poem elaborates on the concept of subjective initiative in explaining a highly anthropocentric and utilitarian view towards nature including changing the physical environment to make it serve human beings, which it clearly states the ambition of turning the natural landscapes into farmland no matter how difficult the situation is and whether it will challenge the laws of nature. It also notes that it is “necessary” and “essential” to exploit the natural resources, which is described as “treasures in the underground warehouse”. The idea of considering the Earth as a warehouse having seemingly unlimited resources for human exploitation reflects the thread of Anthropocene thinking.

Following the pursuit of exploitation towards natural resources and developing undeveloped lands across the country during the Great Leap Forward, Chinese people started their competitive race to strive for the higher agricultural or industrial outputs. The mania of pursuing these unrealistic goals ended around the late 1950s when Chinese people started to suffer from the devastating nationwide famine. Even though it is debatable among scholars to consider the causal relationship between the social experiment and the following natural disasters leading to the famine (Dillon, 2010, p. 318), it seems to me that there is a correlated relationship between them.

After the Great Leap Forward period, China had entered a period of turmoil during the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 (Misra, 1998). During the Cultural Revolution, research and educational systems were paralyzed. Student bands of “Red Guards” searched for and destroyed anything considered bourgeois and anything representing capitalism and the West. Class struggle was the central task in China across different social groups. Hence, people’s living standards were not improved, and poverty was still a common issue faced by a majority of Chinese people.

Deng's era: The Reform and Openness Policy

Mao's passing in 1976 signifies the end of the Cultural Revolution and the class struggles. Subsequently, the return of Deng Xiaoping to the central power of the CCP and to the forefront of Chinese politics marked the beginning of sweeping changes within the Chinese political and economic system. This change marks the significant transition of the CCP's political-ideological reorientation from following the socialist model to direct the party in a "more flexible and utilitarian standard" (Misra, 1998) with a series of new policies.

At the Third Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee in December of 1978, the central committee majorly discussed the urgent need for China to embark on the path of modernization and in this meeting, the Four Modernizations policy has been reintroduced. The pursuit of modernization was firstly introduced on the 15th of September in 1954 by Mao in a speech on the First National People's Congress Meeting of the People Republic of China, where he stated: "our country should be built into a country with high industrialization and modernization level within the next couple decades" ("The Presentation of Four Modernizations", 2009). After this meeting, the first Prime Minister of China Zhou Enlai has included this idea in his report, which explicitly mentions that China "needs to have the modernization of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and national defence" ("The Presentation of Four Modernizations", 2009). This policy aims to create a scientific and technological base for China in preparing for the front ranks of the world's industrial power by the year 2000. The ultimate goal of having Four Modernizations is to get rid of poverty and backwardness in China.

However, this policy was never implemented successfully because of various disruptions including the failure of Great Leap Forward, the nationwide famine and the Cultural Revolution during Mao's era. After a series of failures in achieving modernity in China under the sovereignty of Mao, the Chinese central government under the leadership of Deng started to carry out the Reform and Openness policy. The reform and opening-up is not a single policy but a political decision in reorienting Chinese society away from the socialist past to adopting a new social and economic system. In general, there are two major parts in this policy which include the reform of the economic system and the opening up of foreign trade. Based on the findings drawn from the analysis of newspaper articles, the reform of the economic system consists of 1). decentralizing the planned-economy, 2). maintaining the major control of state-owned businesses, 3). introducing private enterprises for building a neoliberal market, 4). expanding the scope of foreign trade in China. In this case, this policy aims to establish a multi-

layered economic system while having mixed forms of ownership co-existing in China, in which the state-owned businesses hold the dominant control of the market and the private enterprises aim to stimulate the competitiveness in a newly-introduced neoliberal market.

Adopting the multi-layered economic system, the CCP attempted to decentralize the planned economy and therefore withdraw its control in many state-owned enterprises. In other words, the CCP denationalize many state-owned and state-run enterprises. In this case, Chinese economic reform chipped away at the social contract between state-owned enterprise workers and the state by either shutting down enterprises like the heavy-industrial factory in the film *The Piano in A Factory*⁸ or denationalizing state-owned enterprises such as the theatre group in the film *Platform*. These approaches of the CCP were intended to cut down the number of state-owned enterprises and create more market space for the development of private enterprises. However, the direct shut-down or the denationalization of state-owned enterprises has caused issues for laid-off workers and individuals such as the travelling artists as depicted in the theatre group of *Platform*. Especially with the theatre troupe in *Platform*, the group has been denationalized and the ownership of this group has been transferred to Lao Song, which such an ownership transition marks a substantial change for travelling artists. Further discussion on this subject will be elaborated in the next chapter.

On the other side, the CCP set up the four ‘Special Economic Zones’ (hereafter SEZs) along the southern coast of China in 1980, where this zone implements special economic policies and economic management systems into a more intense engagement with the international economy. To be specific, foreign capitalists were allowed to build factories and use cheap Chinese labour to produce goods mostly intended for exports. This step of the CCP has brought in modern machines and management skills from foreign countries to stimulate economic development in China.

Political Propaganda of the CCP in Supporting and Advertising its Policies

Apparently, the policy of Deng has reversed the political ideology of the CCP inherited from the socialist past during Mao’s era for decades, and therefore the introduction of Deng’s policy had generated doubts from both inside and outside the Party. As this policy is essentially in opposition to the socialist model that Mao endorsed, Deng was aware of the significance of

⁸ *The Piano in a Factory* is a film directed by Zhang Meng and released in 2010. This film is set in the context of the 1990s China. Under this historical context, state-owned enterprises in China have experienced great challenges in the transition to the neoliberal market under the policy of reform and openness starting from the late 1970s. In this case, workers in these enterprises were furloughed. Even though urban workers have the freedom to search for jobs on their own, workers who work in these state-owned factories for many years find it hard to adjust to the new social environment.

fashioning a doctrine to refurbish the existing policy by Mao, and to rationalize its critique of the past and establish its legitimacy and the unfettered pursuit of modernization (Misra, 1998, p. 28). In this case, by manipulating a tenet of Mao, Deng utilized it to discredit Mao's later policies and neatly undercut the position of residual Maoists within the Party. In this case, Deng's policy was still considered a legitimate inheritance of Mao's rightful political thinking.

On the other side, there was also a tendency of thinking from a handful of people who ask for more liberalization and democracy ("Key Terms to Understand Reform and Opening Up", 2018, p.44). In order to strengthen the control of the CCP and against this backdrop, Deng introduced the Four Cardinal Principles in a forum held in March 1979. The Four Cardinal Principles are "1). we (the CCP and Chinese people) must keep to the socialist road. 2). we (the CCP and Chinese people) must uphold the dictatorship of the proletariat. 3). we (Chinese people) must uphold the leadership of the Communist Party. 4). we (the CCP and Chinese people) must uphold Marxism-Leninism and Mao Zedong Thought" ("Key Terms to Understand Reform and Opening Up", 2018, p.44). Apparently, the issue of this principle is to strengthen the political control of the CCP and undercut other opposing voices from inside and outside of the Party during this transitioning time.

Other than having the Four Cardinal Principles as political guidance issued by the CCP to strengthen their political control, the CCP has held control over media materials published by news agencies, especially the People's Daily, to exercise the hegemony in speech and to suppress the opposing voices in the society. As the policy has drawn many disputes from both the rightists of residual Maoists and the leftists who call for more democracy, the CCP has argued against both parties who held against the Reform and Openness policy in the newspaper articles. On the one side, the CCP argues against the idea of considering this policy as being a process progressing towards capitalism. To justify Deng's policy that is not adopting capitalism, newspaper articles tend to create a clear binary between socialism and capitalism. Anything related to capitalism is framed as negative and threatening, such as the use of metaphors to denote capitalism as pests ("Reform and Openness will revitalize the Chinese economy", 1984). It has also been explicitly stated in an article arguing "against the view of understanding the Reform and Openness policy as a form of bourgeois liberalization" ("Not Changing the major Direction of the Reform and Openness Policy", 1989). Furthermore, newspaper articles tend to emphasize the difference between the economic system in Deng's policy with the capitalist system, which explicitly argues that the economic system introduced by Deng has a multi-layered market system.

Denying Deng's policy as being part of bourgeois liberalization is not adequate. The discourse in newspaper articles needs to justify the reason to adopt Deng's policy and why it could be considered a way of "building socialism with Chinese characteristics [and] doing things in a Chinese way" (Yu, 1987). In order to do so, the discourse in newspaper articles have attempted to partially explain Mao Zedong's thoughts in favour of Deng's policy, and in the meantime intentionally include the names of theorists such as Marx and Engels without clearly explaining and specifying their theories in detail to make the policy appear supported by Marxist theories. By manipulating the public discourse, the CCP has directed its efforts to justify this policy and argue against their opposition forces.

The CCP has continued to utilize newspaper articles as an essential form of political propaganda in advertising the advantages of this policy among Chinese people, which tends to persuade them to accept this political decision without further questions. In some newspaper articles, phrases such as good, powerful, influential and audacious were repeatedly used to promote the policy. Furthermore, the policy of Deng has been described as "a policy meeting the historical trend" ("Not Changing the major Direction of the Reform and Openness Policy", 1989), and "the desire of Chinese people" ("Not Changing the major Direction of the Reform and Openness Policy", 1989). The policy was also advertised in the newspaper articles by showing mostly its positive influences on Chinese society. Even more, the need for more political propaganda to educate Chinese people has been explicitly stated in some newspaper articles. These articles adopt a commanding tone in the discourse, and phrases such as "obey the discipline of the party" ("Reform and Openness as the Top Priority", 1985) and "insisting on the Reform and Openness policy and Four Cardinal Principles" ("The Reform Needs to be Implemented Under the Leadership of the CCP", 1987), were widely used. Since the CCP has openly exposed their agenda of having more political education for Chinese people, the CCP justifies such education as a form of "developing the spiritual civilization of socialism" ("Reform and Openness and the construction of socialist Spirituality", 1986).

Newspaper articles are not the only form that the CCP has used to promote its policy and strengthen their control. There are other forms of political propaganda that promote the policies of the CCP, such as having policies of the CCP shown on billboards and wall paintings and promoting political decisions of the CCP on the radio. These audiovisual forms of political representation appear in many cinematic details of Jia's film, *Platform*. During the first half of *Platform*, political propaganda is heard through the radio as the background sound in many scenes. In the scene of Cui's mother helping Cui and his friends to tailor their pants into an edgy style around the late 1970s, the radio is playing in the background promoting the hard-

working spirit of a CCP member and encouraging other Chinese people to work hard. This kind of political education was inherited from the socialist past of China during Mao's era, since hard-work is an essential quality under the concept of the subjective initiative. Chinese people can change the adverse physical environment by working hard.

The second time that the political news and political propaganda is heard as a background sound is the scene of a truck driving in front of a pile of factory buildings. Even though the sound of the radio is playing as the background sound, the volume of the sound is even higher than the conversation between the protagonists in the scene. It says on the radio,

“The fifth party meeting of the eleventh central committee of the CCP solemnly announces its decision to all CCP members and all Chinese people. The vindication of Comrade Liu Shaoqi demonstrated the party's determination to restore the originality of Mao Zedong's thoughts. Let us hold the banner of Mao Zedong's thoughts high and move forward to win a greater victory. Long Live Comrade Liu Shaoqi”.

According to Dillon (2010), Liu Shaoqi was a former chairman of CCP who has faced unjust accusations as a result of political struggles during the Cultural Revolution. The restoration of Liu's reputation and the announcement to Chinese people on the radio signifies the political-ideological reorientation from fetishizing Mao's policies to critically examining Mao's mistakes and his political decisions. On the other side, these two examples make clear that radio has been used as a channel for the CCP to inform Chinese people of their political decisions and promote their political propaganda around the late 1970s and early 1980s.

The CCP has also utilized visible political propaganda to promote their policies. During the first half of the movie, visual signs of statements promoting the party's policies, the Marxist theories and Mao Zedong's thoughts painted on the wall can be clearly seen in many scenes. In figure 1, the sentence on top of the auditorium is “fighting to achieve the Four Modernizations”. In figure 2, the faded statement painted on the wall says, “long live the thoughts of Mao Zedong”.



Figure 1 (*Platform*, 0:32)



Figure 2 (*Platform*, 13:32)

Other than those visual signs, there are pictures of socialists seen in the background of different scenes in *Platform*. In figure 3, there are two pictures hanging on top of the wall, which the picture on the left side is Vladimir Lenin and the picture on the right side is Joseph Stalin. In figure 4, the picture hanging on the wall in the background is Engels. The depiction of these pictures reflects that the cultural materials in China around the early 1980s were largely inherited from the cultural heritage of the socialist past.



Figure 3 (*Platform*, 14:53)



Figure 4 (*Platform*, 23:39)

These forms of political propaganda are seen frequently at the beginning of *Platform* but are seen less in the middle and the end of this film. These political signs feature Stalinists language. Inheriting the political propaganda from the socialist past were common during Mao's era, but it has been reduced under the influence of Deng's policy and therefore such signs were less common in the second half of the film. In this case, Deng's policies have led to the change of Chinese cultural materials and such discussion on the influences of Deng's policy on the cultural life of Chinese citizens will be further discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 3 Economic Development and the Cultural transition

So far, we have briefly revisited the history of contemporary China, concluded the crisis in the late 1970s of China leading to a political reorientation and briefly mentioned the Reform and Openness policy and its political propaganda. It is time to re-focus our attention on the policy itself in order to understand its influences in contemporary China. On the one hand, the policy has contributed to the resounding success of Chinese economic development, and on the other hand, it has led to the transition of cultural life for Chinese citizens. In this chapter, I will briefly describe these two major influences of this policy starting from the late 1970s, while closely tying the discussion to cinematic details in Jia's films and interesting findings from the analysis of newspaper articles.

The Improvement of the Material life of Chinese people

As previously mentioned, newspaper articles were used to promote the political propaganda of the CCP, and many articles tend to emphasize the economic development in China as the major positive influence of this policy. Phrases such as revitalizing, developing, improving, benefiting and simulating are widely used in describing the effect of Deng's policy on economic development. Although these newspaper articles have particularly emphasized Chinese economic development, the reality has not been over-exaggerated. This policy, indeed, has contributed to Chinese economic development and the improvement of Chinese people's material life.

A direct comparison showing the improvement of living conditions for Chinese people are the changes in Chinese people's dinner tables. In *Platform*, Cui invites his family and Wen Ying, who is Cui's older cousin studying in high school, to have dinner together in a restaurant. In this scene, Cui's father blames Cui for being wasteful in spending money for dining out. Cui's mother says that "the first time for the family dining out is paid by my son", defending Cui against his father's critique. During the dinner, Cui's brother asks Cui to order more dishes with meat, and so Cui does as his brother requested. In this conversation, it shows that dining out was considered as a luxurious event for Cui's family, and meat as a basic kind of protein was rather uncommon, which could be considered as valuable on the dinner tables of Chinese people in the 1980s China.

With the success of economic development, dining out was no longer an event considered luxurious reaching the mid-2000s. In *The World* and *Still Life*, dining out in restaurants is common for Chinese people, and the kinds of food shown on the table is less important, which shows a sharp contrast comparing the dining event shown in *Platform*. When

reaching the mid-2000s, dining out becomes a social event for people to communicate with each other, especially evident in a scene of *The World* when Tao has dinner with Anna before Anna leaves her job in the park, and in a scene of *Still Life* when Sanming has dinner with brother Mark after Sanming provides help to brother Mark who was trapped in the middle of constructing ruins. In this case, the social meaning of dining out has changed from being a luxurious event to being a common social event for Chinese people, which directly shows that Chinese people have broken away from their past economic poverty and fundamentally improved their quality of life.

Not only have the challenges of Chinese people's subsistence been greatly improved, but the improvement of the living conditions of Chinese people has also been shown through many other cinematic details in Jia's films including an increasing number of automobiles on the roads and the widespread usages of electronic devices. As evidenced in *Platform*, automobiles such as tractors and trucks occasionally appear in Fenyang around the early 1980s and at that time, the commonly used vehicle for Chinese people was the bicycle. As the film proceeds, bicycles as the common vehicle for individuals to commute in their daily life are gradually replaced by motorcycles. Approaching the early 1990s, there are many trucks, cars, and motorcycles parked on the street shown in *Platform*. This change in the growing number of automobiles is not a sharp increase from less to more, but it is a gradual and continuous increase from the late 1970s to the early 1990s of China.



Figure 5 (*Platform*, 13:10)



Figure 6 (*Platform*, 01:11:00)



Figure 7 (*Platform*, 1:51:36)



Figure 8 (*Platform*, 02:21:45)

Another realistic element in *Platform* signifying the development of living conditions in Fenyang is the increasing use of electronic devices from the 1980s to the 1990s. In figure 1, there are glowing light bulbs in public spaces such as the auditorium, indicating that electricity has been utilized in the urban area of Fenyang around the late 1970s. I notice that electricity is not only being used in the public space of Fenyang, but electricity is being used in individuals' households in urban Fenyang shown through the use of electronic devices such as a radio, or a cassette player in *Platform*.

However, television was still considered a luxury item for an individual or a family around the late 1970s. In *Platform*, Zhong asks her friends Yin, Cui, Zhang and Eryong to watch an ABC TV series named *Garrison's Gorillas*.⁹ A group of people are sitting or standing in front of a television to watch the television show together. There are two silk banners hanging in the background of this room as decoration; therefore, this space is more likely to be a public space possibly an office in a government building. In this case, it reflects the reality of the underdeveloped material condition in China during the late 1970s. This situation has been changed drastically in the 1990s. Approaching the end of this movie, Cui and his mother are sitting together and watching television at home shown in figure 10 even though it is a black-and-white television. At the end of this movie, the sound of the television is playing in the background sound when Yin is playing with her child. The transition from sharing a television in the public to owning a television at home also reflects the improvement of living conditions for Chinese people.



Figure 9 (*Platform*, 27:33)



Figure 10 (*Platform*, 02:17:39)

In general, *Platform* depicts the picture of social and economic development in China from the late 1970s to the early 1990s and another film *The World* following right after has featured the continuing social and economic development in China around the mid-2000s. Reaching the mid-2000s, transportation modes such as cars, buses, and trains, electronic

⁹ According to a blog published by Ma (2015) on the Quartz website, the American TV series named *Garrison's Gorillas* was broadcasted in mainland China in 1978.

devices such as mobile phones, walkie-talkies, car TVs, elevators and karaoke machines were no longer rare in the modern city of Beijing. Taking into the consideration of the difference between Beijing as the capital of China and Fenyang as an unattractive county-level city, Beijing has more resources compared to Fenyang without doubts. However, Beijing resembles an attractive and upgraded version of other cities in China, where the development in Beijing reflects the economic development in China to a certain extent. All in all, the profound success of economic development under the influence of Reform and Openness policy has brought significant changes to the daily life of Chinese people, which the problem of the subsistence deprivation has been solved. Chinese people are able to access various kinds of resources in their daily life, and so the material life and the living conditions of Chinese people have been greatly improved.

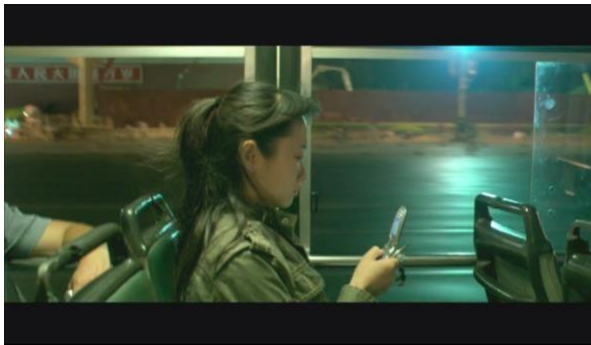


Figure 11 (*The World*, 25:45)



Figure 12 (*The World*, 38:20)

The Transition of the Cultural Life of Chinese people

Other than the change of the material life of Chinese people under the influence of the resounding success of economic development, the reform and opening-up has also transformed the cultural life in China immensely. SEZs has not only brought in foreign investments China, but it has also introduced many other cultural materials from outside of China into a relatively conservative Chinese society starting from the early 1980s, which spurs a trend of pursuing foreign cultural materials among youth and a broader scale of cultural exchanges (Moise, 2008, p. 217) in mainland China.

In *Platform*, the theater group especially the protagonists Cui, Zhang, Zhong, and Yin are attracted to Western consumerism and to products such as current fashions and foreign movies. And they are more subtly and deeply attracted to the self-oriented and even indulgent values that such commercialism—and youth culture—thrive on. Other than the pursuit of western consumerism among youth in the theatre group, the cultural exchanges have also been reflected in the change of the performing style of the theatre group. After the denationalization of the theatre group as briefly noted in previous chapter, the performing style gradually changes

from the revolutionary style adopted from the socialist past to a western style under the influence of cultural exchanges. The transition in the performing style is because the theatre group is subject to competition in a neoliberal market, and they need to adjust their performances to match the taste of audiences. In this case, the introduction of the neoliberal market in China apparently has led to an increasing level of cultural exchanges by introducing other cultural materials into mainland China.

By the mid-2000s, the cultural life of Chinese citizens is dominated by the presentation of other cultures, especially western culture. The most obvious example is an actual theme park located in Beijing presenting the replicas of world-famous architecture in miniature to visitors, where Jia's film *The World* was shot. The existence of a huge entertainment park like The World Park accurately demonstrates the increased level of cultural exchanges in the era of globalization. Other than the theme park itself presenting a micro-world of globalization, the performances delivered in the theme park by Tao and her colleagues also present the global culture, in which every culture could be performed outside of the original cultural context. At the beginning of *The World*, the film depicts an on-stage performance which delivers a sense of exoticism by introducing many different cultures from all over the world.

The introduction of foreign cultural materials into China is beneficial to Chinese people, which on the one side, it seems to provide a certain level of freedom for Chinese people in getting out of the cultural life adopted from the regimented socialist model mentioned in chapter two. On the other side, it is beneficial to Chinese people in breaking down the conservatism inherited from the socialist past by adopting a more open-minded and liberal attitude towards things originally being considered as non-socially acceptable or non-socially recognizable, such as pre-marital sex as shown in *Platform* and *The World*.

Even though social custom has become increasingly open and democratic in China, the introduction of capitalism to China has forcefully interfered with the Chinese people's perception of certain cultures. Under the umbrella of cultural exchanges and globalization, the fetishization towards western countries is hidden in the shadows. Back in 1996, there was a newspaper article called *Why So Pretentious to be Western* discussing the trend of Chinese people providing western names to commercial products in order to make these products sound popular. Through this article, it is clear to see the growing fetishization of western countries among Chinese people. The fetishization of the west has also been shown in *The World*. When Taisheng provides a tour to see the replicas of architectures in the park to his fellow migrants traveling from Shanxi province, he specifically introduces the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center from New York, the Elizabeth Towers from London, the Eiffel Tower, and Notre Dame

Cathedral from Paris with a tone of pride. It is clear that he is proud to be able to access other cultural materials especially those from western countries.

It seems debatable whether the fetishization of western countries is because of Chinese people's curiosity towards western culture or Chinese people's desire to be wealthy like people in capitalist countries. In my opinion, the desire to be wealthy builds up the fetishization of western countries among Chinese people, which further leads them to be interested in western culture. On the one hand, China's government always attempts to compare China with western countries, including agricultural output, industrial output, and the level of urbanization in their political propaganda, inherited from the political ideology of the socialist past. In this case, the CCP has constantly emphasized the importance of catching up with the west in Chinese people's minds. Being repeatedly informed by the CCP in various kinds of political propaganda, Chinese people were well aware of the disparity between China and western countries regarding economic development starting from the late 1970s. The "better" image of western countries was fed by the CCP in its political propaganda to Chinese citizens through the catch-up game.

On the other hand, private enterprises began to appear after the implementation of Deng's policy and the number of private enterprises has quadrupled from 1989 to 1992 in the neoliberal market (Bakken, 1998). Reaching the mid-2000s, the level of neoliberalism in China has been advanced and the majority of enterprises in China are privately owned and run. The theme park in *The World* itself is a commercial park engaging in a highly profitable business. Other businesses shown in *The World* including the real estate developers that migrant workers Sanlai and Er Guniang work for, and the clothing manufacturing studio run by protagonist Taisheng's mistress Qun are private sectors. In an increasingly capitalist society, the desire for money and power is more obvious among Chinese people. In *The World*, Taisheng is not only working as a team lead of the security team in the park, he also participates in other illegal activities for money as his side job. Under such a social context, individuals like Taisheng can easily compromise their moral and legal standards for illegal activities. In this case, the fetishization of western countries of Chinese people seems to be more justified if to understand it as a form of desire for capital accumulation. In *Still Life*, the desire for capital is obvious in its cinematic details. At the beginning of the film, when brother Mark, a bully who later becomes friends with the protagonist Sanming, and his partners set up a scam on the ferry to Fengjie with a magic trick of turning papers into US dollars and Euros. The opening words for this magician are "people are depending on US dollars to walk on the water", in which the walk on the water is a metaphor entailing the ferry travelling on the Yangtze River. Another scene

in *Still Life* shows brother Mark watching a Hong Kong film named *A Better Tomorrow*, in which Mark, the protagonist in *A Better Tomorrow* ignited his cigarette with a piece of burning US currency. These two scenes entail the fetishization of western countries showing essentially the desires of Chinese people towards capital, especially western currency, as those are more valuable compared to Chinese currency.

However, Chinese people are suppressed by the power of capital in an increasingly capitalist Chinese society. In the same scene of the magic trick, when the magician turns Euros into Renminbi and he walks bypass Sanming, he uses a pile of Renminbi to slap Sanming on his face. The use of money to slap Sanming's face is insulting, but Sanming does not react to or argue against this insulting action. Sanming's lack of a reaction is a sign signifying the submissiveness of people, especially those working classes like Sanming, under the power of capital. More discussions on personal existential crises of different groups of individuals under an increasing capitalist Chinese society will be provided in the next chapter.

Chapter 4 Existential Crises of Migrating Individuals

As the material life and cultural life of Chinese people have been massively changed under the huge social and political transformation after the late 1970s, an interesting question emerges from here, whether Chinese people have lived a happier life thanks to these changes? As the level of happiness is hard to measure, how Chinese people feel about these changes and how they fit in with the ever-changing Chinese society may be reflected through the outlook of their personal experiences. In this chapter, I shed light on the personal changes of individuals while especially focusing on their existential crises under such a social context as an attempt to reveal the social issues that have emerged during the transformation of contemporary China. Due to the massive transformation of the economic system in China, the demand for Chinese

labor market has also changed. In order to make economic reforms more thorough and adaptable to the labor needs of economic reforms, the Chinese government issued “the Circular on Rural Development” (Sun, 2019, p. 76) in 1984, the policy allowing farmers to engage in other sectors and allowing their rural-urban migration. Since then, farmers can move to cities and engage in other forms of labour. According to Sun (2018), this policy caused several massive rural-urban migrations during the 1980s, because, on the one hand, the land could not absorb the huge rural labor force, which was described in a newspaper article as “not having much employment in rural areas” (Ban, 1994), on the other hand, there was mass labour demand in booming enterprises of coastal cities and metropolitans in China and therefore migrant workers “flow into the well-developed regions to make a living” (Shi, 2002).

In Jia films, he also focuses on urban-rural migration as one of the main features. He examines the migration through the lens of “city drifters” (Mello, 2019, p. 24) including traveling artists such as those in the theatre troupe in *Platform*, internal migrants from the so-called Chinese ‘floating generation,’ such as Tao, Taisheng, Sanlai and Er Guniang in *The World* and Sanming and Shen Hong in *Still life*. Even though there are many city drifters in Jia’s films, there are different groups of city drifters with different socioeconomic statuses that I intend to clarify. By looking at the characters in *Platform* and *The World*, there are two narrative lines in these films: the travelling artists in *Platform* and the performing group in *The World* are protagonists in the main narrative line of both films; and the workers including Sanming in *Platform*, and Sanlai and Er Guniang in *The World*, delivering a side narrative line. On the face of these films, there are two groups of floating populations and two narrative lines. These effectively signify the difference of socioeconomic statuses in two different social groups. According to Bakken (1998), the floating populations in China include both non-

agricultural workers and agricultural workers who flow from one place to another—within urban areas, from rural to urban areas, and also from urban to rural spaces. Migrant workers specifically refer to groups of people migrating from rural areas to cities in search of jobs and they are mostly doing physically intensive jobs with receiving below-average salaries (Shi, 2002). To elaborate, migrant workers with low education can only get “three-D” jobs—dirty, dangerous, and demeaning (Sun, 2019). Under such definitions, the coal miner, Sanming¹⁰ in *Platform*, the construction workers, Sanlai and Er Guniang in *The World*, and demolition worker, Sanming in *Still Life* are all migrant workers.

In many scholarly writings, the group of travelling artists in *Platform* are not considered migrant workers and Tao and Taisheng in *The World* are considered migrant workers. In my opinion, Tao and Taisheng are not migrant workers but they belong to the floating population. I consider Tao and Taisheng as a genre of “外来打工者 Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe” meaning people who travelling from other provinces for work. It seems that there is not much of a difference between migrant workers and *Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe*. However, there is an essential distinction between these two social groups in understanding the differences of their social statuses. Tao and Taisheng in *The World*, in my opinion, cannot strictly be considered as migrant workers, because their jobs are less physically intensive, and their jobs have a certain level of social recognition especially Taisheng as a team lead of the security team in the park holding the power to utilize a minivan for his job. Their social statuses resemble the travelling artists in *Platform*, in which they are marginalized in an increasingly capitalist society of China, but they are not as desperate as migrant workers who face a variety of problems to simply get by. In this case, I intentionally distinguish two different social groups, to understand their different levels of existential crises. Even though the travelling artists in *Platform* are not so identical compared to Tao and Taisheng in *The World*, I will group them together and name them as “the entrapment group” for the scope of this research in order to understand their similar individual existential crises. Another group is migrant workers, in which their problems will be discussed jointly.

The Entrapment Group: The Contradiction between Mobility and Immobility

In *Platform* and *The World*, Jia draws a contradiction between mobility as ideal and immobility as the social reality unveiling the existential crises of the entrapment group. In *Platform*, travelling artists desire to build up their personal connections with the outside world

¹⁰ Han Sanming is Jia Zhangke’s cousin who has repeatedly taken roles in Jia’s films including *Platform* and *Still Life* using his real name.

by following the popular fashion trend and adopting western consumerism as previously mentioned. However, due to the inaccessibility of Fenyang as an inland city, travelling artists have tried their best to follow the trend but they are always behind the trend. In a scene, the previous leader of the theatre group discusses the art of light music and he comments that such discussion has started much earlier in large cities and the group has just started to consider light music as a form of performance.

In an inaccessible city like Fenyang, a train is a vehicle that could bring travelling artists to the outside world. In *Platform*, Jia has utilized the audio signs and visual signs of the train at the beginning, middle and end of *Platform*. At the beginning of *Platform*, the travelling artists loudly imitate the sound of the train in the dark for more than one minute. It signifies the start of the modernization process in China and it also reveals the complicated social and economic transformation coming up beginning in the late 1970s. In the middle of *Platform*, Cui listens to a song named “Platform” on the truck, when the theatre group is stuck in a mudflat during travelling. The lyrics are the following:

The long long platform, the long long waiting
 The long long train, carrying my brief love
 The crowded platform, waiting in solitude
 Only have the love for the departure, no love for the return
 Oh, lonely platform
 Oh, Waiting in solitude
 My heart is waiting, always waiting
 My heart is waiting, always waiting
 My heart is waiting, always waiting,
 My heart is waiting, waiting

When the song starts to enter into its chorus lines, travelling artists observe the approaching train passing nearby them and they run to the railroad tracks and scream to the train. Their mania towards the train including the screams and the expecting eyes on the train of travelling artists delivers a sense of ceremony, as if travelling artists celebrate the feeling of seeing something new and rare in their lives.

The two scenes that I mentioned above, include audio signs and visual signs of a train, which are symbolic because the train is an effective means of transportation for people to travel outside from the inland, and an underdeveloped city like Fenyang during the late 1970s. In this case, the train indicates the hope of getting access to the outside world, in which the outside world denotes more developed cities in China such as Guangzhou being mentioned multiple

times in *Platform*. The desire of moving to metropolitans in China reflects the ultimate desire of having upward social mobility among travelling artists, as metropolitans offer more and various kinds of opportunities for individuals in pursuing their ideal form of living.

While the train signifies the promising future of leaving Fenyang for the outside world as a form of idealism for travelling artists, the absence of a physical platform in the film refers to their social reality. The lyrics of the song “Platform” signify travelling artists constantly waiting for an opportunity to leave for the outside world. Their wishes of leaving Fenyang did not fulfil because the platform of a railway station that is necessary for their departure is absent in the film. Even though the film is being named *Platform*, it is named after the song to signify the endless waiting of travelling artists. The desire to know the outside world and the inability to fulfil their desire marks the contradiction between mobility as an ideal and entrapment as the social reality for travelling artists. The social reality for travelling artists consists of a variety of inimical problems including the increasing number of personal existential crises under the massive political and social change.

The marginalization of travelling artists after the denationalization of the theatre group is an example of showing their personal existential crises. At the beginning of *Platform*, Cui proudly makes a statement by replying to an accusation of his mom saying, “if you don’t pay for my bills, the CCP will do it for me”. Being in a state-run enterprise was something that one could be proud of during the late 1970s. According to Hassard et-al (2008), workers in state-owned enterprises were conventionally considered as a privileged group within Chinese society. In the first performance named *The Train Running Towards ShaoShan*, Yin introduces the performance and she utilizes the word “慰问 (Weiwen),” which could be interpreted as the theatre group showing a sense of gratitude to audiences, who are mostly villagers in rural areas, for giving this performance. The word “慰问” in and of itself delivers a sense of condescension, which implies the travelling artists having a higher social status than villagers in rural areas.

However, the life of traveling artists has gone downhill after the denationalization of the theatre troupe. The theatre group has essentially lost the aura of being a state-run enterprise. Approaching the end of *Platform*, Lao Song brings the twin dancers to a cultural station¹¹ and he intends to apply for building a temporary stage and giving a performance in this region. In this cultural station, the twin dancers are tricked by a man, who is not in charge of the station, for performing a part of their show as a form of censoring the performing materials. When they discover the truth, the twin dancers stop walking after stepping outside of the station because

¹¹ A cultural station is a governmental organization to approve cultural events in a specific region.

they feel being humiliated. Lao Song says to them, “it is inevitable to be restrained if you are doing performances to make a living, and (doing that partial performance) is not causing any forms of physical harm.” This line signifies that being humiliated and losing self-esteem is better than having physical harm, and individuals need to compromise whatever they have in order to make a living. For this final performance in *Platform*, the theatre group has no other choices, but uses the back of the truck as a stage and they perform on the side of a street with no audiences but just vehicles passing by. This scene showing that no person stops for the performance signifies the marginalization of travelling artists under the social transition.

The third time the train appearing as a sign in *Platform* is at the end of the film when Yin plays with her child over a kettle, the sound of the kettle resembles the sound of the train. In the same scene, Cui sleeps on the right side of a couch. The film ends with the scene of showing the small family of Cui and Yin, which signifies that Cui and Yin compromise to live their life in a way that they used to strive to get away from. This final scene of protagonists Cui and Yin building a small family in Fenyang signifies the failure of travelling artists in pursuing their desires of leaving Fenyang for the outside world.

In *The World*, Jia also features the contradiction between mobility and immobility as the major individual personal struggle for Tao and Taisheng as *Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe*. Like travelling artists in *Platform*, Tao and Taisheng also desire to escape their regimented daily life. A vehicle employed to foreground a similar contradiction is the airplane shown in *The World*. In a scene, Tao is dressed as a flight attendant sitting in a grounded airplane in the theme park. The inability of a plane to actually fly off the ground is a “visual sign of the mobility-immobility dichotomy” (Mello, 2014, p. 193). Following that scene, Tao complains about the dullness of being in the park in a conversation with Taisheng, her original words are “staying here every day and I am turning into a ghost.” In this case, it is not only Tao and Taisheng not being able to take a flight to locations that they fetishized such as Paris and London as previously mentioned, but they are trapped in the theme park with the regimented daily life. Following this conversation, the film includes an animation sequence featuring a drawn figure of Tao, again dressed as a flight attendant, soaring the sky over Beijing’s cityscape, signaling Tao’s desire for freedom and leaving her monotonous daily life in the park.

Tao and Taisheng’s desire to get out of the regimented life in the park and travel to more developed places in western countries signifies their desires for upward social mobility. In another scene in *The World*, Tao and Taisheng are in a motel and have a conversation about their difficult lives and their desires in Beijing. Taisheng mentions his desire to have upward social mobility, which he says, “on the first night that I arrived in Beijing, I swear to myself

that I must achieve something in this place while I am lying on the bed and listening to the sound of the train.” Tao relies on Taisheng by saying “Nonsense! Where did the sound of the train come from.” No matter whether the sound of the train exists or not, it functions as a metaphor signifying Taisheng’s desire for upward social mobility.

On the one hand, the globalized surroundings of the park with replicas of world-famous architectures creates a fake utopia for Tao and Taisheng, which allows them to consider themselves connecting to the globalization and having the opportunities of upward social mobility. Several lines delivered by Tao saying “I am heading to India” or “are you heading to Japan” renders a sense of absurdness in itself because she only travels between different sites of replicas in the park, although she expresses it as if she travels between India and Japan in the concrete world. The seemingly globalized surroundings in the park allows Tao and Taisheng to develop a sense of superiority and pride in themselves, which further nourishes their fantasies and their pursuits of upward social mobility in Beijing.

However, such fantasies in the park are disrupted by reality. In *The World*, Jia has utilized various cinematic details to depict the social reality of protagonists. the title card shot at the very beginning of *The World* has already shown the social reality of Tao and Taisheng as *Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe*. As shown in figure 13, this shot pictures a panoramic view of the theme park featuring the replica of the Eiffel Tower, all while a ragpicker slowly traverses from the left to the right of the screen. while occasionally stopping in the middle and looking directly into the camera when the name of the film appears on the screen. This long camera take creates a sense of contradiction between the urbanization, globalization, and modernization in Beijing, and the disjointed life of a ragpicker doing a lowly service profession while having an unsanitary physical appearance. This contradiction foreshadows the main theme of the film that, even though the cityscape of Beijing develops in the process of urbanization, modernization, and globalization, marginalized groups including those of Tao and Taisheng as *Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe*, and Sanlai and Er Guniang as migrant workers who will be discussed further in the next section, are excluded and incompatible with the modern cityscape of Beijing.

Other than the title card shot, the social reality of Tao and Taisheng is also shown in a cinematic detail in a section name stating “大兴的巴黎 The Paris in Beijing Suburb¹²” shown in figure 14. This section name specifically exaggerates the sense of contradiction, in which the sense of fanciness in Paris is disrupted by DaXing, an underdeveloped suburb in Beijing during

¹² 大兴的巴黎 actually refers to ‘The Paris in Daxing’, but it is translated in the film as ‘The Paris in Beijing Suburb’, which neglects meaningful details in the differences of translation. However, it is still a detectable difference for a Chinese native speaker.

the mid-2000s. Interestingly, the location of the actual theme park in Beijing is not in the DaXing suburb but in the Fengtai suburb, which is a suburb closer to the city center. In this case, Jia has intentionally stated the theme park located at the DaXing suburb as its cinematic background, where he wishes to exaggerate the sense of inimicality between the fanciness of Paris and the backwardness of DaXing. This cinematic design implies the disconnection of Tao and Taisheng with the possibility of having upward social mobility, as those opportunities are often provided closer to the commercial zone in the city center.



Figure 13 (*The World*, 07:04)



Figure 14 (*The World*, 27:08)

As *Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe*, Tao and Taisheng do not have any opportunities to break the class rigidity for gaining upward social mobility in Beijing, not to mention fulfil their desire of travelling to western countries. Instead, *Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe* as a marginalized group is able to travel to Ulaanbaatar, a capital city of Mongolia, which is a sign in *The World* indicating an underdeveloped region. Ulaanbaatar has appeared in *The World* three times. The first time of it being mentioned is when Tao's ex-boyfriend Liangzi travels to Ulaanbaatar by train. The second time is when Anna has dinner with Tao before she quits her job as a performer in the theme park, the Ulaanbaatar appears in the weather forecast on the television, which spurs interests in Anna in explaining the personal meaning of the Ulaanbaatar in her heart to Tao. For Anna, a foreign worker from Russia, Ulaanbaatar where her sister lives represent the connection with her home. Different from Anna, Ulaanbaatar represents an underdeveloped area thousands of miles away from home for Chinese people, where the marginalized groups with relatively lower socioeconomic statuses such as Liangzi, Tao and Taisheng can have opportunity to travel and inhabit.

Following that conversation between Anna and Tao in a small restaurant, Anna teaches a Mongolian song named "The Night of Ulaanbaatar" to Tao, in which the name of this song is also utilized as a section name in the film. Its lyric read:

The night of Ulaanbaatar, it's so tranquil, so tranquil,
Even the wind cannot be heard, cannot be heard.

I am running to let you know, I am not turning back.

The night of Ulaanbaatar, it's so tranquil, so tranquil,

Even the cloud doesn't know, doesn't know.

The night of Ulaanbaatar.

Our world, what had been changed?

Our world, what is it expecting?

Our world, what is left now?

Our world is only left with barren desert.

The lyrics poeticize the social reality of *Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe* and speak for them, in which the stress and pain in them cannot be heard and be known. It is shown as an example of how Jia employs popular music to expand a film's thematics. Following the poeticizing language of the social reality, the lyrics further question the rapid change occurring in the world especially in China during the mid-2000s; this is coincidentally reflected in the slogan of the theme park as the "ever-changing world," and reveals the perplexity and loss of Tao and Taisheng as *Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe* under the rapid changes in Chinese society.

The existential crises for the floating generation like travelling artists in *Platform* around the 1980s and Tao and Taisheng in *The World* around the mid-2000s are quite similar considering their desire for upward social mobility and their desires for getting rid of regimented daily life in an increasingly capitalistic and ever-changing Chinese society. Both groups are trapped in their different but rather similar social reality considering their socio-economic statuses and their marginalization. Interestingly, it seems that Tao and Taisheng in *The World* has fulfilled the desires of travelling artists in *Platform* by moving to a metropolitan city of China, Beijing, if to connect these two cinematic narratives together. In this case, under the continuing social changes in the passage of time, people who live in the later eras might be able to live a life that people from the previous era desired to have.

The existential crises of individuals such as those of travelling artists and those of Tao and Taisheng may change slightly in their content due to their different social contexts in different eras, but the essence lying behind all of these is the same, which is the issue of social stratification in a hierarchical system of an increasingly capitalist Chinese society. In *The World*, this inequality is more desperate. Beijing, as a highly dense post-socialist and modern city, delivers a sense of urban utopia with the promise of a tantalizing prosperity and economic security for the lower-class population such as Tao and Taisheng as *Wai Lai Da Gong Zhe*, but the unfulfillment of Tao and Taisheng for breaking their class rigidity renders an ultimate sense of hopelessness.

In *The World*, the imagined freedom and the desire for upward social mobility of Tao and Taisheng might not be able to be fulfilled in reality, but it is actualized in the virtual world in which they travel to France and Germany through playing a game named “The Magic Carpet Bringing You to Travel Around the World” in a souvenir shop inside the park. By utilizing photoshop techniques, Tao and Taisheng fulfill their desires of travelling to western countries, deceiving the fulfillment of their desires while contradicting their harsh social reality, delivers an even stronger sense of poignancy.

Migrant workers at the Bottom of the Hierarchal system in China

As previously mentioned, migrant workers are the rural labourer surplus who migrate from rural areas to urban cities in search of a better life. Migrant workers are the group of people who have nothing to lose in their lives since they do not own much. A single bedroll, backpack, and bag are what they have following their migration to different areas of China. In *The World*, migrant workers Sanlai and Er Guniang are supplied only with prepared bedrolls and backpacks, when they first come to Beijing and visit Taisheng in the park. Another protagonist in *The World*, Er Xiao (the cousin of Taisheng who works as a security guard in the park under the leadership of Taisheng), is expelled by the company because an act of theft he commits was caught by police. After that, he leaves the park with his bedroll and a backpack as his sole belongings. Other than these two scenes in *The World*, Sanming, the protagonist in *Still Life* who travels from Shanxi province in search of his wife and his daughter as a migrant worker, has only a bag with him when he travels to Fengjie county on the ferry. When brother Mark and his partners attempt to swindle money out of tourists on the ferry by pretending to teach them a magic trick, they threaten Sanming to hand in money as the “tuition fee” for learning the magic trick. When Sanming denies their request, they snatch Sanming’s bag and search it for valuable items and they find out there is only a toothbrush, a toothpaste, two water bottles and two packs of cigarettes. The man says, “Poor wretch!” to Sanming. When Sanming and his co-workers wish to leave Fengjie county to pursue working at coal-mining businesses in Shanxi province at the end of *Still Life*, all of them carry their bedrolls and bags as their only belongings preparing them for travel.

Migrant workers do not possess much but they are also “doing the dirtiest and the most labour-intensive jobs” (Ban, 1994) in cities. Due to the fact that the majority of the migrant workers who come to the cities lack education, the only thing they could sell is their labour, which leads them to do physically intensive jobs. In *Still Life*, Jia has intentionally included many scenes focusing on the hard work of demolition workers on the site of demolished

construction ruins. Shown in figure 15, demolition workers, who are topless, wearing hard hats (or not), smash the ruins of buildings repeatedly under the sun and their sweat cover their bodies. Regarding the living conditions of demolition workers, Sanming and his co-workers live in a small and dirty hostel as shown in figure 16, and there are more than three people living in the same room together. Their meals mostly consist of pure noodles with no proteins and very small amounts of vegetables as shown in multiple scenes of *Still Life*.



Figure 15 (*Still Life*, 23:37)



Figure 16 (*Still Life*, 26:00)

Even worse, migrant workers face a variety of problems violating their basic human rights. In the neoliberal market, businesses are profit-oriented and business owners exploiting migrant workers are not uncommon, where migrant workers are just considered as cheap labour. In this case, the business tends to provide unequal working contracts, such as “life and death contract” (Shi, 2002), for migrant workers in order to maximize their profits. In a scene of *Platform*, Sanming searches for a job in the mining pit and he is not able to understand the statement on the contract because he is illiterate. He asks Cui for help in reading the contract. Through Cui’s words, audiences can grasp a basic understanding of the content of this contract, which it states:

“Life and Death Contract

- 1) Life and death, poor or rich, it is all destined. I, myself, am self-volunteering to do coal mining in Mr. Gao’s Coal Mining Pit. If I face an emergency that causes my death, the Mining Pit has no responsibility for the accident.
- 2) Following the revolutionary humanitarian spirit, if I die due to an accident, the mining pit will pay 500RMB¹³ to his/her next of kin.

¹³ According to an article named *How much purchasing power is equivalent to 5 dollars in the early 1980s* posted by SINA Financial Headline in 2019, the author estimated the value of Chinese currency compared to now with considering the differences in food prices between the one in the 1980s and the one in 2019. Under his calculation, 5 RMB worth around 60-70 RMB in 2019 and I estimate that 500 RMB in the 1980s of China worth around 6000-7000 RMB, approximately 1200-1400 CAD, in 2019.

3) The salary for each employee every day is 10 RMB¹⁴.

When proceeding to read the contract, Cui slows down his speed and lowers his voice, which implies the sense of pity Cui has for Sanming. The sense of pity might be due to Cui's consideration for the danger in performing this job or the unsatisfactory salary rate, or both. After Sanming hears and understands the contract, he accepts this job offer without much hesitation. The employer asks Sanming to change his clothes to a working uniform and starts to work right after.

The situation of Sanming in *Platform* reflects the reality of many other migrant workers during the 1980s of China. Around the 1990s, "fatal accidents occur frequently on the worksite" (Xu & Li, 1993) and mostly due to "the neglect of the secure working condition in work and efficient supervising system" (Xu & Li, 1993). If the death of a migrant worker happens on the worksite, the business owner will "pay money to solve the problem" (Xu & Li, 1993). Such fatal accidents of migrant workers in working sites did not cease to exist even in the mid-2000s. In *The World*, Er Guniang passed away because of the severe work injury and his final words are his written explanations of his debt status, which reveals the personality of him being pure and kind. The sudden death of Er Guniang with his final words being a debt list delivers an ultimate sense of poignancy when thinking of a kind person passed away due to an accident at work, where the safety at work should have been monitored by the business owner and supervised by the government, and many accidents could have been avoided.

Migrant workers, such as Er Guniang are ghostlike and unrecognized by the society. Er Guniang's parents travel to Beijing from Shanxi to deal with this situation. Er Guniang's parents are shown in utter silence in the office when they received 30000 RMB¹⁵ as compensation from the business owner to pay off the death of Er Guniang's life due to the work injury. In this scene, the business owner has not expressed any condolences to Er Guniang's parents and the only words coming out of his mouth are "you count (the money)." The indifferent attitude of the business owner towards the fatal accident signifies the coldness and brutality of capitalism in contemporary Chinese society. Following that scene, the death benefit is delivered to Er Guniang's parents and the father receives the money trembling with tears swirling in his eyes silently (See figure 17). Later, the parents remain silent, without tears, on the construction site where the deadly event occurred and where other migrant workers burn

¹⁴ Following the way of calculation in the footnote 7, 10 RMB in the 1980s of China is equivalent to 120 -140 RMB, approximately 24-28 CAD, in 2019.

¹⁵ 30000 RMB is equivalent to approximately 6000 Canadian dollars disregards the floating currency exchange rates.

paper money to mourn the death of Er Guniang in the dark night (See figure 18). The silence and the burning scene in the dark delivers a sense of desperation, which the death of Er Guniang does not earn a place for migrant workers and their families to speak for themselves and not even express their stress and pain. Migrant workers and their families are ghostlike and insignificant in such a social context.



Figure 17 (*The World*, 01:55:04)



Figure 18 (*The World*, 01:56:53)

Another example of a work injury of a migrant worker leading to his disability is shown in *Still Life*, in which the husband of the middle-aged prostitute loses his arm while working in a factory. In the film, it is shown to audiences that his arm was lost due to a work injury, but they could not receive enough compensation for his disability. Hence, the worker and his family visited their previous working factory, which is not the factory causing the harm, to request compensation. In the scene, the worker's family members and his friends continue to ask the previous factory owner to take responsibility for this accident. As one of the friends or family members of the worker says, "if you did not sell your factory, he would not travel to other places as a migrant worker, and if he does not go out for working, his arm would not be broken". The previous factory owner argues that there is no causal relationship between the worker's accident and the event of selling his factory. This scene where the worker's family members and friends outnumber the other side, the factory owner, delivers a sense of power imbalance, which seems that the worker and his alliances are being provocative and unreasonable in asking for compensation. In this case, the working injury has led to disability, but the worker and his family have not received enough compensation from either business owners or government funds. This situation is intricate, but there is no organization offering help to migrant workers in solving this problem, which signifies the lack of a consummate legal system in China for protecting the rights of migrant workers and a management mechanism prepared for tackling this kind of problem.

Let alone any discussion about responsibility, the power imbalance in the confrontation is shown through the significant difference in the number of people of two sides, which there

is the only one business owner arguing against numerous people who speak for the disabled worker. The power imbalance signifies the reverse of the power relationship, which it is implied migrant workers as a weaker side and the business owner as a stronger side. It is because migrant workers have less social power, they need to unite together in supporting each other. At the end of this scene, the worker and his allies leave the office with resentments because they did not receive the financial support they were looking for, even though they might not have been to the right place in seeking it.

As shown in the previous two examples, the conditions for migrant workers working in cities are harsh and insecure most of the time, which could easily lead to occupational injuries and death. However, migrant workers themselves are aware of the potential danger at work and they continue to work on those sites because they do not have many other options, considering their existing financial problems and their insignificant social status. In *Still Life*, Sanming works as a demolition worker while looking for his wife in Fengjie. After he successfully gets in touch with his wife, he informs his co-workers that he decides to leave Fengjie and return to Shanxi as a coal miner, because a coal miner receives a higher salary, around 200 Renminbi per day compared to earning around 50 to 60 Renminbi being a demolition worker. His co-workers show their intentions to join him in moving to Shanxi province. Sanming warns his co-workers explicitly saying that being a coal miner is much more dangerous than being a demolition worker and the fatal accidents happen frequently in a coal mining pit. After being informed by Sanming, his co-workers maintain silence and continue to smoke their cigarettes with heavy looks. While acknowledging the danger as a coal miner, Sanming's co-workers still decide to leave Fengjie for Shanxi. In the next morning, this group of people carries their mere belongings heading to Shanxi as shown in figure 19. The final scene in *Still Life* depicting Sanming stopping his steps half-way on his way moving to Shanxi with his co-workers. He turns his head around and sees a man walking on a tightrope which hangs in-between two buildings (See figure 20). This scene is a surrealistic scene in the film and the man on a tightrope signifies the situation of migrant workers metaphorically, which the life of migrant workers is on the verge of death and destruction and they have no other choice but to move forward carefully and discreetly in order to survive in such a hierarchical and capitalist Chinese society.



Figure 19 (*Still Life*, 1:43:45)



Figure 20 (*Still Life*, 1:44:05)

Chapter 5 The Urbanization of Contemporary China and Its Influence

Before the reform and opening up, the level of urbanization during the Maoist era was low because, firstly, the government migration controls and a system of food rationing and household registration secondly, the isolated Chinese economy from the rest of the world, and thirdly, the imbalance of development between inland regions and coastal regions in China (Zhang, 2002, p. 2302). On the one hand, the urbanization process during Maoist era was stagnant, and on the other hand, Mao wished to push China into modernization, which he has shown this through his ambition of building the Three Gorges Dam.

In 1956, Mao had an onsite visit to Wuhan, Hubei Province, and the Yangtze River region. Mao brought out the idea of building a dam in the Three Gorges region during this visit. Mao wrote down a poem as previously mentioned in the second chapter to show his ambitions of conquering the Yangtze River. Adopting Mao's wishes, the CCP started to send research teams for fieldwork in investigating the geographic condition of the Yangtze River area and evaluating the possibility of building a dam over that region starting from the mid-1950s. In 1978, after Mao passed away, the ambition of Mao conquering nature and building the Three Gorges Dam was re-mentioned in a newspaper article named *Chairman Mao Denoting the Direction to Conquer the Yangtze River* as a way to mourn the death of Mao and re-emphasizing his achievements. In this newspaper, the construction of the Three Gorges Dam was considered "an excellent project to be marked in the historical monument of mankind being able to control and model nature" (Lin, 1978). Under Mao's guidance, the fieldwork aiming to discover the feasibility of building the Three Gorges Dam was completed around the end of the 1980s, in which a report had been provided to the CCP in assisting the party to make a final decision (Yang & Wang, 1989).

Before making this decision, there were opposing voices from scholars who expressed their concerns of environmental problems caused by building the dams. In 1981, there was a newspaper article named *It is Urgent to Protect the Fish Resources in Yangtze River* written by Wang, which introduced the construction of dams causing problems to the reproduction of fish in the Yangtze River. In 1989, there was another newspaper article warning the CCP to be critical in making such a decision by taking into consideration the possible destructive consequences to other creatures living in the environment.

However, these warnings and criticisms towards the construction of the Three Gorges Dam were futile. On the one hand, the construction of the Three Gorges Dam reflected the completion of the legacy wishes of Mao. On the other hand, it also fulfilled the CCP's desire

to show the “Greatness” of China. In many newspaper articles, this project was framed as “building the most prideful monolith in the history of Chinese hydropower” (Huang & Zhu, 2005), and “being the sign of national dignity and solidarity” (Wu & Yang, 1997). In this case, the construction of the Three Gorges Dam was undoubtedly decided, regardless of the warnings of environmental problems.

The construction of the dam officially started in 1994 and completed around the early 2010s. The explanations for the function of building the dam with other additional dams aim to impact in the following six ways: 1. generate hydropower and form the central point for distributing electrical power for a wide area of China; 2. utilize the massive reservoir to effectively control flood issues for the Yangtze River region; 3. provide improved navigation for large vessels; 4. provide water transfer to the Yellow River region, where experiences a severe water shortage; 5. provide irrigation to surrounding areas; 6. create a better living environment for citizens by insulating them from natural disasters and limitations of the environment (Alberts et al, 2004, p. 588-89). These functions mentioned above delivers a highly anthropocentric and utilitarian view of the human-nature relationship, and through “controlling” nature in this way, it creates various forms of benefits for the good of humans. Without doubts, such a massive construction of the Three Gorges Dam has shaped the natural landscapes of China. According to Albert et al (2004), such a scale of remodelling nature might lead to potential geological disasters including silt, earthquakes, landslides, and shoreline pollution. Chinese engineers are aware of these dangers but they managed to construct this project to meet the agenda of the CCP in benefiting of all the stakeholders. Other than these potential natural disasters caused by the construction of this project, the project has caused social issues including the forced relocation of a huge population, and the demolition of ancient city Fengjie in preparing for the reservoir.

Unfortunately, the demolition of historical sites and old cityscapes is not uncommon during the urbanization process in China, and the demolition of Fengjie ancient city is just an outstanding example and it is known mostly due to the construction of Three Gorges Dam. However, many other ancient architectures and cultural heritage in China were torn down silently during the process of urbanization, where the demolition of old cityscapes in China give way to constructing the “new” and “modern” cities through developing city infrastructures such as the transportation systems, constructing high-rise buildings such as shopping malls and commercial residential buildings. The demolition of ancient architectures and old cityscapes in China has caused the loss of cultural heritage and led to the loss of original hometowns for many Chinese citizens. In this chapter, I will discuss two major consequences caused by the

reckless pursuit of the urbanization and modernization process in China, which includes the loss of cultural heritage and the nostalgia of Chinese citizens recalling their old hometowns due to the demolition of ancient architectures and old cityscapes in China, and at the end sheds light on the oblivion and obliteration of natural landscapes due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

The Demolition of Old Cities and Ancient Architectures

1). The Loss of Cultural Heritage in China

Under the influence of Reform and Openness policy, the favourable treatment of the SEZs allows cities such as Guangzhou and Shenzhen to develop ahead of other cities in China. In *Platform*, a postcard mailed by Zhang to Cui when Zhang visited his aunt in Guangzhou depicts the well-developed cityscape in Guangzhou in the late 1970s (See figure 21).



Figure 21 (*Platform*, 47:00)

Compared to Guangzhou, Fenyang as an inaccessible city in Shanxi province fell behind in its process of urbanization which starts rather late around the end of the 1980s. In the film, *Platform*, the urbanization process of Fenyang is shown through the reconstruction of its cityscape in Fenyang including rebuilding the street. The protagonist Yin explicitly complains about the construction sites on the street and her short grievance marks the loss of the original cityscape in Fenyang during the accelerated process of urbanization in China.

The change of cityscape in Fenyang is not only shown in the cinematic content of *Platform* but also shown in its filming process. In *Platform*, ancient city walls have been featured multiple times in the historicity of Fenyang City. Unfortunately, the historicity delivered through the walls was disrupted by the rush of urbanization. According to Mello (2019), the cinematic content showing the ancient city walls does not depict the Fenyang ancient city but rather Pingyao's ancient city, which is one of China's best-preserved historical cities, now listed by UNESCO as a world cultural heritage site. The reason for filming the ancient city wall in Pingyao's ancient city instead of Fenyang's ancient city is because the one in Fenyang was demolished and destroyed under the rush of urbanization at the time of shooting

in the late 1990s and early 2000s. According to Jia (2017) in a conversation with Chen Danqing, a famous painter in China, Jia has found out that the demolition of ancient architectural buildings in Fenyang had started from the late 1990s before he directed his film *Xiao Wu* in 1997. In preserving the memories of his hometown, he produced the film *Xiao Wu* as his first film of the hometown trilogy. *Platform* was directed and produced in 2000 when the ancient city in Fenyang had been mostly demolished. In this case, Jia has to compromise and shoot this part in Pingyao's ancient city. The compromise itself reveals the severe problem of losing cultural heritage and the loss of the original cityscape in Fenyang under the reckless pursuit of urbanization in contemporary China.

It is not only the ancient wall in Fenyang that was torn down, the ancient city Fengjie was also destroyed due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam project. Fengjie is a famous city in Chinese history.¹⁶ In a scene of *Still Life*, when Shenhong reaches out to Wang Dongming, her husband's previous comrade on the battlefield, in search of her husband Guo Bin, Dongming is evacuating an ancient tomb dated to the Han dynasty.¹⁷ In this case, it is clear to see the historicity of Fengjie as an ancient city where many historic relics can be discovered, and so it should be well conserved for further archaeological research in understanding Chinese history. However, the ancient Fengjie city has been demolished regardless of its value in archaeology and Chinese culture. A newspaper article writes that "the millennium ancient city before its demolition is more intriguing" (Cai, 2002), which inspires readers to rethink the wrongful decision of demolishing the ancient city and mourn the loss of cultural heritage.

There are also concerns about the destructive influences on Chinese culture considering the loss of cultural heritage. In a newspaper article named *Saving the Soul of Cities* written by Yang (2000), she discussed the importance of conserving cultural legacies as those are the soul of cities signifying the history and culture of China. However, such a warning in critically thinking the consequences of the reckless pursuit of urbanization in China cannot outweigh the growing fanaticism of urbanization, as this is being mostly promoted in the majority of newspaper articles, with phrases such as "improving the scale and functions of metropolitans" (Hu & Shi, 1998), "developing small cities" (Wu & Zhang, 1990), and "having the better urban infrastructure" (Lu, 1991). Under the pursuit of urbanization, the importance of conserving

¹⁶ Fengjie is a county with a dense history. Since the Xia Dynasty (21st - 16th BC), people have been living in this place. It was also mentioned in a Chinese ancient poem named *Departing from Baidi in the Morning* written by Li Bai as the white emperor city.

¹⁷ The Han Dynasty was one of the longest of china's major dynasties, dated from 206 BCE to 220 CE.

heritage buildings and historic relics in China was intentionally ignored by the CCP and local governments in different regions of China, which leads to the destruction of historic relics as a common event in China. Such destructions of old cityscapes in the urbanization process of China left Chinese citizens with a sense of nostalgia; Chinese people are now overwhelmed by the feeling of being isolated and objectified in this rush to modernity, which will be further discussed in the following section.

2). The Ruined Homes/Hometowns During the Urbanization Process of China

Due to the scale of constructing the Three Gorges Dam, there were “19 cities and counties in total needed to be submerged” (Li, 1992) for building the reservoir and so there were more than “1.1 million Chinese citizens including children and the elderly who needed to be relocated to other regions” (Li, 1992). Having this large population needing to be relocated, the CCP firstly needs to persuade citizens in accepting this decision. The CCP has utilized multiple approaches in doing so including having the CCP members visit each household and talk to citizens, utilizing the power of discourse in newspaper articles to show appreciation to the sacrifice of forced migrants for “the greater good” of China. In many newspaper articles, phrases such as “having the spirit of self-sacrificing” (Fan, 2003) and “sacrificing small families for the nation” (Zhu, 2006) were mostly used in describing citizens who were forced to relocate. In order to justify the relocation plan of the CCP, newspaper articles majorly discussed the benefits of relocation considering its advantages in economic development and also possibly creating better living conditions for migrants. In this case, it seems that forced migrants were being nicely prepared under the assistance of the CCP and local governments in moving to other regions.

However, it is obvious to newspaper articles from People’s Daily intentionally promoting information that meets the political agenda of the CCP. In this case, the utopian version of forced migrants’ lives might not reflect the real situation in the Three Gorges region. In *Still Life*, Jia speaks for the social reality of forced migrants and other social groups under the massive change in the Three Gorges region around the mid-2000s. In a scene of *Still Life*, when Shenhong and Dongming visit the office of demolition headquarters in Fengjie in search of her husband Guo Bin, a group of topless men plays Mahjong in the yard of the office. Later, another bare-chested man walks into the yard with an injury on his head and he explains why he is injured. Knowing the situation, this group of men gets ready for an act of vengeance right away. In this case, it seems that the demolition headquarter was organized and run by a group of gangsters under the leadership of Guo Bin, a businessman, which this office supposes to be led by the government of Fengjie. In this case, it reveals the forced demolition in ancient

Fengjie city which the demolition office headquarters organized by a group of gangsters entails the ultimate violence used to threaten any possible rebellious individuals and groups during the demolition process. It further entails the collusion between government officials and capitalists in the demolition process. Behind this scene, it signifies the CCP has taken both the political propaganda as a softer approach and violent threats as a careless means in pushing the construction of the project.

Under various approaches manipulated by the local government and the group of gangsters in pushing the relocation plan and the demolition of Fengjie, the citizens of Fengjie have no ways to be rebellious but to obey the decision of the CCP for relocating. In *Still Life*, forced migration is not the major focus in its cinematic narrative but it appears several times in cinematic details throughout the entire film. In a scene of *Still Life*, it features a conversation between the prostitute and Sanming directly touching on the topic of forced migration. Sanming informs the prostitute that her home will be demolished soon, and he further inquiries her future plan. She replies that she plans to move to Guangdong province. Sanming further asks about her disabled husband and she replies that “it is impossible for two of us waiting to die here and we need to make a decision (for the future)”. This sentence delivers a melancholic sense in her helplessness of being abandoned by the government and the society under the massive change. In this case, she was forced to migrate to Guangdong province while her hometown is being destructed. Following this narrative, Sanming coincidentally meets the prostitute at the dock waiting for the ferry and they greet each other for the last time. The prostitute asks Sanming about his work and Sanming replies that he is on his way to demolish the building of China Construction Bank. It is an ironic answer provided by Sanming intentionally designed by Jia in this conversation. Considering the social context, China had experienced a massive scale of urbanization in the 2000s and China Construction Bank has made itself a winner during this process, which this bank has become a powerful sign of capitalism during the rush of urbanization process in China.

The forced relocation of Fengjie citizens leaves them a sense of nostalgia towards their hometown the ancient Fengjie, while their original hometown was ruined under the demolition process, and they officially became the marginalized group of homelessness. In a scene of *Still Life*, when the motorcyclist takes Sanming to the ancient Fengjie city which has been submerged by water, the motorcyclist points to a spot in the middle of water and tells Sanming that the spot in the water is the location that he is looking for. Sanming questions why this city was being submerged by water and the motorcyclist replies “the ancient city of Fengjie has been submerged long ago. Have you ever watched the news on television, and do you know

about the Three Gorges Dam project”? After Sanming blames the motorcyclist for bringing him to an incorrect location, the motorcyclist argues against Sanming saying “I do not have a say in having it to be submerged by water.” At the end of this conversation, the motorcyclist says to Sanming with his finger pointing to a boat on the water, “do you see the boat docking over there? My home was originally underneath it and (it was) lost a long time ago.” These two lines of the motorcyclist express his anger of having his home being demolished and submerged by water, but he did not have a say in making this decision. His words also deliver an ultimate sense of nostalgia in recalling his lost home. In another scene of *Still Life*, the feeling of nostalgia is explicitly expressed by brother Mark in a conversation with Sanming. Brother Mark says to Sanming after seeing Sanming’s written address of his wife on an old cigarette case, “do you know that the current society is not for us because we are too nostalgic”. This line delivered by brother Mark concisely indicates the individual's struggles under the rush of urbanization in China. When old buildings are demolished, and homes of Chinese are ruined, Chinese citizens are overwhelmed by the loss and all left to them is nostalgic emotions.

For Chinese people, newly built “homes and hometowns” are no longer the places that they are familiar with, the loss of original homes and hometowns delivers the ultimate existential crises for Chinese people. In a performance in *Still Life*, a topless man sings “Any Old Wine Bottles for Sale”.¹⁸

Such a familiar voice
 I’ve known it all my life.
 I never need to recall it
 Because it’s never left me.
 No heaven without earth!
 No earth without a home!
 No home without you!
 No you without me!
 If you hadn’t raised me,
 Shielded me so warmly,
 Protected me so carefully,
 What would be my destiny?

¹⁸ This song 酒干倘卖无(Any Old Wine Bottles for Sale) was originally the theme song of another film named *Papa, Can You Hear Me Sing*, which speaks to the importance of the family connection between an adopted daughter and a father.

In *Still Life*, this song speaks for the relationship between hometowns and Chinese people. This song is performed by the topless man at the top of his lungs, which delivers a sense of heartbreak when uncovering the social reality in understanding the loss of home among Chinese people. The original homes and hometowns as safe havens for Chinese people were ruined during the urbanization process. While the safe havens of Chinese people no longer exist, how do their nowhere-to-place souls struggle to survive in this ever-changing Chinese society? This is the question that Jia intends to ask in *Still Life*.

The Oblivion and Obliteration of Natural Landscapes in China

The construction of Three Gorges Dam does not only lead to the loss of hometown for Fengjie citizens, it also caused the oblivion of the nature in the Three Gorges region. In a place so thoroughly mediated and visualized as the Three Gorges, it is all but impossible to look around and see a single natural landscape. In *Still Life*, Jia has taken an approach in showing his mourning in the loss of natural beauty in the Three Gorges region by making simultaneously visible of many layers of representations and ideology that adhere to this famous landscape.

Present throughout the film, these layers are mostly explicitly visible in a series of scenes performed by Sanming. When Sanming settles down in a hostel and he meets the group of demolition workers. One of the demolition workers asks Sanming in which way he gets to Fengjie either by boat or by bus and Sanming replies by boat. The worker continues to ask whether Sanming has seen 夔门 (Kuimen), where the Yangtze River flows into Three Gorge region. Sanming does not know the location where the worker refers to and so the worker takes out a 10-yuan banknote showing Sanming the place called Kuimen stamped right at the back of this banknote. Sanming takes over the banknote and looks at the scene closely. A cut to a close-up reveals the stamped presentation of Kuimen on the banknote (See figure 22). Sanming then shows his friend a 50-yuan banknote, this time with his hometown stamped on it, represented by the Hukou Waterfall of the Yellow River (See figure 23). It is important to point out that the banknote provided by Sanming is from an older series that circulated in the 1980s and 1990s. A worker takes over the banknote and takes a close look at Sanming's hometown, which he further shows his appreciation of the natural beauty of the Hukou Waterfall.

This dialogue is then followed by three shots, the first cuts to a medium shot with Sanming standing in a higher position against the backdrop of the real landscape of Kuimen and holding the 10-yuan banknote in his left hand as he looks to his right at the landscape (See figure 24). The first medium shot features Sanming standing in the middle of the scene and he is surprised to seeing the front side of the banknote, which is shown through Sanming's facial

expressions especially his frowned eyebrows (See figure 25). Following right after that, there are two close-ups of the banknote. The first close-up shot shows the front side of this banknote featuring Chairman Mao's smile (See figure 26). Then Sanming flips the banknote over to find the representation of the natural landscape of Kuimen on the reverse (See figure 27). This series of shots showing the specific insertion of Mao's smiling portrait in between the medium shot showing the natural beauty in Kuimen and the close-up shot showing the stamped version of Kuimen on the reverse side of a banknote creates a sense of irony, especially when considering Mao's ambitions of conquering the Yangtze River and controlling nature through the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. It further justifies and explains the surprising look of Sanming when he sees Mao's portrait. In the following scene, Jia's camera pans slowly from right to left with a deep focus in Sanming's point-of-view shot to see the panorama view of Kuimen from a far distance. However, this scene is layered with images of the ruins of ancient Fengjie and the sound of construction, which audiences can identify it as the sound of demolition under the cinematic context.



Figure 22 (*Still Life*, 26:43)



Figure 23 (*Still Life*, 27:14)



Figure 24 (*Still Life*, 27:18)



Figure 25 (*Still Life*, 27:22)

Figure 26 (*Still Life*, 27:23)Figure 27 (*Still Life*, 27:25)

Shown through this series of shots, it is clear that Sanming was ignorant of this natural landscape when he arrived in Fengjie city travelling by boat through Kuimen at first. Under the guidance of other demolition workers, he has redirected his eyes to a previously unfamiliar natural landscape in Fengjie. By reorienting the natural landscape of Kuimen in Sanming's eyes, Sanming connects this natural landscape in Fengjie with his hometown represented by the Hukou Waterfall of Yellow River. With the minor comparison between these two natural landscapes in China, Jia intends to imply that the natural beauty in China was slowly being transformed and fading away. The scene featuring the 50-yuan banknote from an older series, which no longer circulates in China, suggests that the natural landscape of Hukou Waterfall has been changed under the influence of urbanization. In this case, Sanming has already lost his original hometown and similarly, the group of demolition workers would also experience the loss of their hometown due to the construction of the Three Gorges Dam.

Other than the cinematic narrative associated with this series of shots containing the substantial amount of information, the reality of turning the majestic natural landscape of China into banknotes as small and lightweight pieces of papers meant for circulation in a capitalist society is also highly symbolic in understanding the social reality of contemporary China. Having the epic grandeur of the Chinese natural landscape stamped on banknotes capitalizes nature in a way by minimizing and materializing it. The banknote itself is an explicit materialistic presentation of capitalism. Other than that, Mao's smile being stamped on at the front side of the 10-yuan banknote depicts the oppression of nature by the political power of the CCP. In this case, the beauty of nature being inscribed in a capitalist medium with having the political power on the front side signifies the exploitation of nature by the dual central power of the CCP and capitalism.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Jia Zhangke, the leading sixth-generation director, has portrayed a realist picture of contemporary China through the combination of documentary impulse and artistic pursuit in his films. As shown in many cinematic details of Jia's films presented in previous chapters, Jia adds nuanced details to reflect the cinematic narrative background, such as pictures of socialists including Stalin and Lenin hanging on the wall showing as the background of a cinematic scene in *Platform* (See Chapter 2). Other than that, Jia has carefully designed the dialogue of protagonists in his films especially shown in *Still Life*, such as the dialogue between brother Mark and Sanming, the dialogue between the prostitute and Sanming, and the dialogue between other demolition workers and Sanming. All of these dialogues are short and concise, but they reflect a deeper meaning in response to both social and environmental issues of contemporary China. In Jia's films, silence is commonly seen and in different cinematic narratives of Jia's films, the protagonists use silence to indicate their different situations. In general, there is no lengthy dialogue or narration in Jia's films, and his cinematic expressions are presented through the details of the cinematic narrative and cinematography.

Further, Jia includes a variety of public performances in *Platform*, *The World* and *Still Life*, and all of these performances presented in his films are also carefully designed. Jia utilizes these performances to map the personal encounters of the protagonists in the backdrop of changing times. Other than performances, music is another form of artistic expression that Jia often includes in his films, such as the song Platform in *Platform*, the song The Night of Ulaanbaatar in *The World*, and the song Any Old Wine Bottles for Sale in *Still Life*. Not only do these songs fit the popularity of the era in which the cinematic narrative is set but they also metaphorically reflect the personal struggles of protagonists under the changes in Chinese society.

These cinematic details showing both the realistic aesthetic and artistic pursuit of Jia films present the realist image of contemporary China. The semiotic analysis of these realist cinematic details in many ways nicely corresponds to the research results from the discourse analysis of newspaper articles from People's Daily. By providing my semiotic analysis of Jia's films *Platform*, *The World* and *Still Life*, and my discourse analysis of the People's Daily's newspaper articles in previous chapters, I offer here the conclusions of my thesis with the summary of the main discussion of previous chapters.

The Changes of the Daily Life of Chinese people and Chinese Landscapes

As discussed, the reform and openness policy have revolutionized the political, cultural and social landscape of China. Among all influences of the reform and opening-up, its most direct and significant influence is the resounding success of rapid economic development in China, which provides an opportunity for both Chinese government and Chinese people in their different forms of capital accumulation and it has laid a solid foundation for various other changes in Chinese society. On the other hand, the opening-up policy has not only revolutionized SEZs through providing these areas favorable treatment and it has also introduced various kinds of cultural materials from outside of China, which pushed forward a cultural transition in contemporary China.

Under the massive influence of the reform and opening up, the daily life of Chinese people has undergone radical changes. Materialistically speaking, Chinese people experience their life from being austere and materially deprived in Mao's era to being materially resourceful during Deng's era. For Chinese people, the improvement of their quality of life and living conditions is the most obvious demonstration of their private capital accumulation. As shown in Jia's films *Platform* and *The World*, Chinese people are able to gain access to an increasing number of resources in their daily life. Culturally speaking, the cultural life of Chinese people under the influence of opening-up policy has also been transitioned from inheriting those cultural materials from the socialist past to adopting foreign cultural materials. This transition breaks away from the conservative social custom by introducing a more open-minded way of thinking in society. Under the dual influence of the improvement of material life and the transition of cultural life, Chinese people have access to more cultural materials of western countries. In this case, it leads to the fetishization of capitalism among Chinese people under the disguise of pursuing western culture in an increasingly capitalist society of contemporary China.

China's rapid economic growth has also benefited the CCP in its capital accumulation, which provides adequate funds allowing the CCP in pushing forward its agenda of realizing the goal of modernization in China through a massive scale of urbanization. Although urbanization itself is not a derogatory word, the urbanization process in China is reckless and audacious with numerous forms of sacrifices including the sacrifices of ancient architectures and old cityscapes leading to the loss of cultural heritage, and the sacrifices of the natural landscapes, and the sacrifices of the personal life of some Chinese people especially those forced migrants of Fengjie shown in *Still Life*.

Against the backdrop of such complex times, the life of Chinese people is hybrid. While Chinese people enjoy better living conditions and improved material life, they are also tempted by capitalism and materialism. While they are nostalgic in recalling their loss of original homes and hometowns caused by the reckless pursuit of urbanization, they also appreciate the convenience of life brought to them by the modernization and urbanization, for example, Chinese people enjoy the freedom of travelling to different regions of China through well-developed transportation systems between regions and within the city. In this case, Chinese people are seeming self-contradictory and they are also confused under this massive social transformation. Just as Wagner (2013) argues that Chinese people are constantly reorienting themselves in the continuous transformation of Chinese society, which leads them to have a rather perplexed and mixed attitude towards the social changes in China.

Not Simply a Vivid “Anthropocenic” Story

In this ever-changing social environment of China, nature is an all-time silent and uncommunicative agent who does not enjoy any of the benefits from the process of modernization and urbanization in contemporary China, and it starts to suffer even before this process starting from the late 1970s. It seems that the contemporary Chinese history from Mao’s era to post-Mao’s era reflects a vivid story of Anthropocene, in which human activities in China has directly and significantly influenced the natural landscapes in China. During Mao’s era, Mao ambitiously wished to transfer the agrarian economy of China to a modern communist utopia through Chinese citizens’ continuing efforts in changing the adverse physical environment to serve for human purposes. In setting over-optimistic goals during the Great Leap Forward, Chinese citizens have no other way to reach the goal, but they can only recklessly exploit natural resources as mentioned in Guo Moruo’s poem. With the nationwide famine that followed, it is not clear whether it was a vengeance of nature in fighting back the audacious exploitation of natural resources from Chinese people, however the famine following the Great Leap Forward shows that the human-nature relationship is dynamic and constantly changing.

In the post-Mao era, the exploitation of natural resources is covert and hidden as effectively shown in Jia’s films. On the one hand, natural resources have continued to be exploited silently under the rush of economic development and urbanization process in China, as constructing new and modern cities and building urban infrastructures request a large number of natural resources as its raw material. On the other hand, nature is not only being exploited, but it is also temporarily “controllable” to a certain extent under the massive man-

made infrastructure, the Three Gorges Dam. It reflects an unhealthy human-nature relationship, where human is the subject and the controller, and nature is the object being controlled.

However, are people who perform these activities, such as exploiting natural resources, building the Three Gorges Dam, responsible for it, and what is the primary cause of these activities? During Mao's era, Chinese people, especially proletariats and the working class, were under the hegemonic control of the CCP, where Chinese people were mostly brainwashed by various forms of political propaganda in China. The fanaticism towards Chairman Mao creates the cult of personality on Mao which disallows the majority of Chinese people to be critical in considering political decisions made by the CCP. During the Great Leap Forward period, the national wide famine and the period of the Cultural Revolution, the life of Chinese people were heavily influenced by political decisions and also their attitudes towards nature were largely affected to the political propaganda of the CCP. Under such a condition, many Chinese people who have involved in activities being considered as not environmentally friendly to a certain extent contribute to the damages of the natural landscapes in China.

After the reform and opening-up, Chinese society undergoes rapid economic development, and the accelerated urbanization process in China creates an imaginary-utopian society in China for Chinese people. In this process, proletariats such as migrant workers in China are the group of people undertaking the physical-intensive labor of constructing high rise buildings as Sanlai and Er Guniang in *The World*, and extracting natural resources such as coal mining as Sanming in *Platform*, and demolishing ancient buildings in preparing for the construction of Three Gorges Dam as Sanming in *Still Life*. However, this group of people were also victimized under the control of dual-central power including the ultimate political control of the CCP and the increasing power of capitalism in China. The mobility of migrant workers within China is dependent on the policy of the CCP, especially referring to the Circular on Rural Development published in 1984, but conversely, they are subject to oppression in a neoliberal market as their injuries and deaths are insignificant and could be easily paid off by capitalists.

Other than migrant workers, other proletariat groups such as travelling artists in *Platform*, and Tao and Taisheng in *The World* also experience their existential crises as being trapped in their social status with no hope of breaking the class rigidity under the control of dual-central power during the massive social transformation of China. In this case, migrant workers are unable to help themselves in getting out of their desperate social reality, and the entrapped group aspires to have upward social mobility in a capitalist society by reorienting themselves to fitting into the ever-changing world. It is not difficult to find out that both groups

are lacking social and political power in fighting against political decisions made by the CCP and the overwhelming power of capitalism in defending nature. Under the dual-central power, both groups as proletariats can only react to the loss of original cityscapes and nature passively through mourning and emerging themselves in the nostalgic emotions.

The human-nature relationship is more complicated than what it seems on the surface, which needs to consider the difference between social groups and their different social realities in a specific social context. Even though the Anthropocene considers all humans as one and a species in understanding human activities on the Earth, it does not seem to reflect the complications of human societies, in which societies have always had an important role in disrupting and interfering in the relationship between humans and nature. In this case, I would like to take the social stratification of different social groups and the social structure as important elements when considering the human-nature relation.

In Jia's films, he clearly distinguishes those people who are in positions of power from those who are powerless. Proletariats, who are often being portrayed as the protagonists in Jia's films, do not have the social and political power to make their voices being respected by powerholders, nor can they change their desperate social reality. Having no difference from proletariats, nature as an uncommunicative agent is also shown as silent, still, and powerless. The silence and powerlessness of nature and proletariats shown in Jia's films contrast with those manipulative and powerful voices in the political propaganda of the CCP, and the carelessness of capitalists such as the indifferent attitude of Er Guniang's boss towards the death of Er Guniang shown in *The World*, and the violent and aggressive behaviours of the group of gangsters under the leadership of capitalist Guo Bin in *Still Life*. The powerlessness is majorly shown as silence and submission, while the political control of the CCP and the capitalist power are shown in many forms including the bulge of political propaganda, the depreciation of human life, and the violence towards any possible rebellious groups. The power of the CCP and capitalism can make silence of those oppressed in various means including the violation of freedom on the human mind and body, and the ignorance of their pain and sufferings. To understand the roles of nature, proletariats, the CCP and capitalists in contemporary Chinese society, one might imagine a situation when two game-players are playing video games and they sometimes collaborate and sometimes compete with each other. The political control of the CCP and capitalist power could be considered as two game-players while all of the others including nature and proletariats are figures in the game that are silent, submissive and always available to a certain extent, for manipulation.

This obvious power imbalance reflects the reality of a hierarchical system in Chinese society, which further uncovers the struggles of proletariats and the unspeakable pain of nature under the hegemonic political control of the CCP and the power of capitalism. The situation in contemporary Chinese society can be well explained in contrary to the statement shown in the preface of the Common Programme as it states:

“The great victory of the Chinese People War of Liberation has ended the era of imperialism, feudalism, bureaucratic capitalism controlling China. The democratic sovereignty of Chinese people is a political control based on the union leadership of the working-class, the peasant class, petty bourgeoisie, national bourgeoisie, and other patriotic democrats, based on the alliance of workers and peasants, and led by the working class”.

Ironically, contemporary China shows exactly the opposition to its founding declaration. Contemporary China reserves the residual imperialism in Mao’s totalitarianism, which is shown through his authoritarian policies and the overwhelming and uncritical political propaganda leading to create an idealized, heroic, and worshipful image of Mao among Chinese people. After Mao’s era, Deng developed a new economic system embracing bureaucratic capitalism under the umbrella of reform and opening-up as a “special” way of inheriting the socialist path. The bureaucratic capitalism is shown exactly through the mixed-form economic ownership with maintaining the central control of the state-owned businesses which shows the use of political power for private pecuniary gain through capitalistic methods of economic activities. The remnants of feudalism are remodelled and reshaped in China. It survives as a form of the hierarchical structure in the central control of the CCP, the scattered power system of local governments, and other organizations servicing for the CCP in its political advantages such as the newspaper agency People’s Daily¹⁹. These organizations play their unique roles in this multi-layered political system of China in order to maintain the hegemonic control of the CCP. In this case, the CCP publicly announced China to be considered as a socialist country with “special characteristics,” is a way to conceal the reality in contemporary China, which such brutal reality includes the entanglement between residual imperialism, the covert and hidden bureaucratic capitalism, and the newly shaped version of feudalism in its alien postures.

¹⁹ According to the critical discourse analysis of newspaper articles from People’s Daily, this news agency tends to promote the policies of the CCP most of the time while occasionally it includes some dissenting voices in their articles, but the number of those articles promoting the CCP outnumber other articles. However, when a social issue is not directly in relation with the interests of the CCP, People’s Daily will pay enough attention to the issue, such as the human rights issue of migrant workers have been largely discussed in many of their articles in raising public awareness and generating public discussions on this issue.

In general, the role of human activities in shaping Chinese landscapes are decided and pushed to complete majorly under the command of the CCP, such as the construction of large man-made infrastructure like the Three Gorges Dam in contemporary Chinese society, while the capitalist market functions as a catalyst, in speeding up the process and aggravating existing social and environmental problems. That is to say, the Capitalocene that considers capitalism as the major force interfering the human-nature relationship does not fully explain what is going on in China. The dual-central power model including the political control of the CCP and the capitalist power, with the residual imperialism and feudalism, sets up the foundation of current social structures in China, and this stable but hierarchical social system leads to layered social and environmental issues that this research primarily questions and intends to uncover the root behind them.

Post-mid 2000s: The Human-Nature Relationship in China

The social structure of contemporary China reveals the fundamental problems causing the multi-layered social issues and environmental issues as mentioned, but the CCP has also attempted to ease these problems through issuing various kinds of laws and policies. Regarding the environmental policies, the CCP had a revolutionary shift on the ethical basis in understanding the human-nature relationship around 2005. According to Cao (2006), China's environmental law and regulation before 2005 was built upon the ethical consideration of anthropocentrism and utilitarianism, which emphasizes the usage of natural resources for the development of China. Under such an ethical basis, the human-nature relationship is highly unequal, which humans are the subject and purpose while nature is the object and instrument without the right to live and its inner values. In this case, traditional Chinese environmental law and regulations emphasize on the remediation to solve various kinds of pollutions, while they ignore the importance of preventing environmental pollution from its causes. Apparently, environmental laws under such an ethical basis are highly inadequate and even futile considering the situation that pollutions are being remediated on the one hand while in the meantime still being produced on the other hand.

In 2005, chairman Hu Jintao has introduced the concept of the “harmonious society,” which emphasizes the importance of a stable relationship between humans and nature (Lan, 2005). In light of this theory, Chinese people are asked to recognize the inner value in nature, which further assists to abandon the binary thinking between humans as the subject and nature as the object. The idea of the harmonious relationship between humans and nature has a deep cultural root in China. Han Confucius's ethics on nature and humans proposed that “humans

and nature are the one” and “human and nature understand each other”²⁰, and further Taoism²¹ argues that humans should adapt to nature and follow its rules rather than making changes to nature. Under the concept of the harmonious society, Hu attempted to revisit the cultural heritage in understanding human and nature relationship, which has directly influenced the environmental law in China.

Following this change of ethical basis in considering the human-nature relationship. The CCP has included pages of written plans for improving environmental conditions and solving various kinds of pollutions in China in the *Outline of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan (for National Economic and Social Development of the Republic of China)* published in 2006, which on the one side emphasizes the importance of saving various kinds of natural resources including water conservation, land conservation, and raw material conservation to enhance the integrated use of resources, on the other side it lists key measures for protecting various kinds of natural landscapes including natural forests, grassland, wetlands, habitats of wild animals and plants. In the *Twelfth Five-Year Plan* released in 2011, other than those important measures being mentioned in the previous plan, it sheds light on the solution of dealing with climate change through effectively controlling carbon emissions and it also introducing the concept of the circular economy, including the importance of resource recycling. In the *Thirteenth Five Year-plan* released in 2016, it has added the section of developing environmentally friendly industries. In 2019, forty-six major cities in China have pushed forward their customized regulations on garbage sorting, and among these cities, Beijing and Shanghai have made their one step ahead in implementing these regulations (Zhao, 2019). In this case, the CCP and local governments have inserted their efforts in publishing various kinds of environmental protection regulations to solve environmental problems in China.

Interestingly, while these environmental protection measures were being brought out, the CCP has not given up on the urbanization and economic development. In the *Eleventh Five-Year Plan*, the CCP pays attention to sustainable economic development and continues to push the process of developing a modern transportation system and urban agglomerations. This brings a contradictory situation in China which the urban cityscapes in China maintain its chaotic and polluted conditions under the urbanization process, while the pollution in rural areas in China is largely being remediated as the majority of natural landscapes such as grasslands, forests, and wetlands, are closer to rural areas in China. In the meantime, the CCP

²⁰ These ideas are developed and propounded by the Han Confucian scholar Dong Zhongshu (ca. 195–105 B.C.) in his magnum opus *Chunqiu Fanlu* (Luxuriant gems of the Spring and Autumn).

²¹ Taoism is an ancient philosophical system in China stemmed by Lao Zi and Zhuang Zi.

continues to encourage a rural-urban migration, which leads to an increasing number of residents in cities while rural areas turn out to be empty and sparsely populated.

Under such a situation, the imbalanced development and the uneven population distribution in urban and rural areas of China aggravates the pollution problems in cities specially metropolitans such as Beijing. According to Chen (2009), there are two major pollution problems in China including the water pollution attributed to the rapid industrial development and the high-speed urbanization process, and the air pollution due to the rapid growth of the transport system and the large consumption of unclean coal, especially in northern China. These major pollution problems were widely recognized by the CCP around the end of the 2000s, but these problems are not eased reaching to the 2010s. According to Zhou (2014), the water pollution problem in China is rather complicated consider the differences of regional water systems in China, but in general, the water pollution issue in china majorly reflect through the existence of “a prominent superposition of various pollutants [and] a growing impact of new types of toxic and hazardous pollutants”(p. 1253).

Compared to the problem of water pollution in China, air pollution in China has aroused great attention among Chinese citizens for the frequent haze events in recent years. The air pollution issue has drawn much media attention, which generates widespread public discussions. In 2015, Jia released his short film named *Smog Journeys* in collaboration with Greenpeace in January and a famous journalist Chai Jing released an influential documentary named *Under the Dome* in February, in which both films introduce and explain the severe situation of air pollution especially the smog issue in China. These two films generate heated public discussions on the topic and especially the documentary of Chai has received 117 million views within 24 hours (Cui, 2017, p.30).

Ironically, the documentary of Chai was forced to be withdrawn from online media platforms including the People’s Daily Online and other mainstream platforms from the 7th of March 2015, and it was officially banned by the Publicity Department of the CCP who were both concerned about generating overwhelming public pressures, as well as concerned about having Chinese people gathering collectively for uncensored movements (Cui, 2017, p. 40). The CCP suppressed Chai’s criticisms towards the state and the party since she directly and explicitly questions the lack of pollution management in a couple of state-own businesses. The CCP’s reactions to Chai’s documentary are inconsistent with its attitude of publishing environmental protection policies. The party issued and passed environmental laws and regulations in putting efforts of restoring the harmonious relationship between human and nature, and in a contradictory manner, the party suppresses voices that could be beneficial in

raising public awareness on environmental protection and further calling for supervising unregulated businesses. Down to the root, the publication of environmental laws and regulations is a way to rebuild China's image internationally and show the world that China is determined to catch up with the Western world in environmental protection, which is an effective way of arguing against those international opposing voices accusing the CCP in its ignorance of environmental protection. The CCP might be well-aware of the fact that the social structure in China and the institutionalize capitalism in state-own businesses have a direct influence in the problem of lacking enforcement of environmental law in China. The criticisms from Chai hit the nail on the head and so the CCP exercises its hegemonic power in banning this documentary. With the manipulation of media, the CCP suppresses certain voices and promoting others such as those discourse in newspaper articles of People's Daily, in presenting an unreal mask of China while hiding existing social and environmental problems underneath this pretentious appearance. This further confirms the entanglement of residual imperialism and the remodelled version of feudalism in assisting the dual-central power including the political control of the CCP and bureaucratic capitalism in contemporary China. It is the rooted problem in the Chinese social structure that obstructs the Chinese people from pursuing a truly harmonious human-nature relationship in an equal society.

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Appendix A Mediography

I. Filmography of Jia Zhangke

***Xiao Shan Going Home* (小山回家, *Xiao Shan hui jia*, 1995)**

Directed by Jia Zhangke,

Screenplay Jia Zhangke; *Cinematography* Hu Xin; *Editing* Jia Zhangke.

China, 59 minutes.

***Xiao Wu* (小武 *Xiao Wu*, 1997)**

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Screenplay Jia Zhangke; *Cinematography* Yu Likwai; *Editing* Lin Xiaoling; *Producer* Jia Zhangke, Wang Hanbin, Li Kitming.

China, Hongkong, 108 minutes.

***Platform* (站台 *Zhantai*, 2000)**

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Screenplay Jia Zhangke; *Cinematography* Yu Likwai; *Editing* Kong Jinglei; *Producer* Shozo Ichiyama, Li Kitming; *Cast* Wang Hongwei (Cui Mingliang), Zhao Tao (Yin Ruijuan), Liang Jingdong (Zhang Jun), Yang Tianyi (Zhong Ping), Wang Bo (Yao Eryong), Han Sanming (Sanming).

China, Hongkong, Japan, France, 154 minutes and 193 minutes.

***The World* (世界 *Shijie*, 2004)**

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Screenplay Jia Zhangke; *Cinematography* Yu LikWai; *Editing* Kong Jinglei, *Producer* Shozo Ichiyama, Chow Keung, Takio Yoshida; *Cast* Zhao Tao (Tao), Chen Taisheng (Taisheng), Jing Jue (Wei), Jiang Zhongwei (Niu), Wang Yiqun (Qun), Wang Hongwei (Sanlai), Er Guniang (Liang Jingdong); Ji Shuai (Erxiao), Xiang Wan (Youyou), Alla Shcherbakova (Anna), Han Sanming (Sanming).

China, Japan, France; 133 minutes and 108 minutes.

***Still Life* (三峡好人 *Sanxia haoren*, 2006)**

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Screenplay Jia Zhangke; *Cinematography* Yu LikWai; *Editing* Kong Jinglei, *Producer* Zhu Jiong, Wang Tianyun, Xu Pengle; *Cast* Han Sanming (Han Sanming), Zhao Tao (Shen Hong), Li Zhubing (Guo Bin), Wang Hongwei (Wang Dongming), Ma Lizhen (Missy Ma), Zhou Lin (Xiaoma Ge/ Brother Mark), Luo Mingwang (Brother Ma).
China, Hong Kong; 108 minutes.

24 Cities (二十四城记 Er shi si cheng ji, 2008)

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Screenplay Jia Zhangke, Zhai Yongming; *Cinematography* Yu Likwai, Wang Tu; *Editing* Kong Jinglei, Lin Xudong; *Producer* Shozo Ichiyama, Jia Zhangke, Wang Hong; *Cast* Joan Chen (Gu Minhua/Xiao Hua), Lu Liping (Hao Dali), Chen Jianbin, Zhao Tao (Su Na).
China, Japan; 112 minutes

A Touch of Sins (天注定 Tian Zhuding, 2013)

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Screenplay Jia Zhangke; *Cinematography* Yu Likwai; *Editing* Mathieu Laclau, Lin Xudong; *Producer* Shozo Ichiyama; *Cast* Jiang Wu (Dahai), Wang Baoqiang (Zhou San), Zhao Tao (Xiao Yu), Luo Lanshan (Xiao Hui), Zhang Jia yi (Zhang Youliang), Vivien Li, Wang Hongwei, Han Sanming.
China, Japan; 128 minutes

Smog Journeys (人在霾途 Ren zai maitu, 2015)

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Screenplay Jia Zhangke; *Cinematography* Yu LikWai; *Editing* Matthieu Laclau; *Producer* Jia Zhangke; *Cast* Liang Jingdong, Liu Lu, Liu Qiang, Zhao Tao.
China, 7 minutes.

Mountains May Depart (山河故人 Shanhe Guren, 2015)

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Screenplay Jia Zhangke; *Cinematography* Yu Likwai; *Editing* Mathieu Laclau; *Producer* Ren Zhonglun, Jia Zhangke, Nathanael Karmitz, Liu Shiyu, Shozo Ichiyama; *Cast* Zhao Tao (Tao), Zhang Yi (Zhang Jinshen), Liang Jingdong (Liangzi), Dong Zijian (Dollar), Sylvia Chang (Mia), Rong Zishan, Liang Yonghao, Liu Lu, Yuan Wenqian, Han Sanming.

China, France, Japan; 131 minutes and 123 minutes

***Ashes is Purest White* (江湖儿女 *Jianghu ernu*, 2018)**

Directed by Jia Zhangke

Screenplay Jia Zhangke; *Cinematography* Yu Likwai; *Editing* Mathieu Laclau, Lin Xudong;

Producer Shozo Ichiyama; *Cast* Zhao Tao (Qiao), Liao Fan (Bin), Xu Zheng, Casper Liang, Feng Xiaogang, Diao Tinan, Zhang Yibai, Ding Jiali, Zhang Yi, Dong Zijian.

II. Expanded Filmography

***A Better Tomorrow* (英雄本色 *Yingxiong bense*, 1986)**

Directed by John Woo

Screenplay John Woo; Chan Hing-kai; Leung Suk-wah; *Cinematography* Wong Wing-hang;

Editing Kam Ma; *Producer* Tsui Hark.

Hongkong, 95 minutes.

***Manufactured Landscapes* (2006, Documentary)**

Directed by Jennifer Baichwal

Cinematography Peter Mettler; *Editing* Roland Schlimme; *Producer* Nicholas de Pencier, Daniel Iron, Jennifer Baichwal; **Cast** Edward Burtynsky.

Canada, 90 minutes

***The Piano In A Factory* (钢的琴 *Gangdeqin*, 2011)**

Directed by Zhang Meng

Screenplay Zhang Meng; *Cinematography* Shu Chou; *Producer* Choi Gwang-suk, Jessica Kam; *Cast* Wang Qianyuan(Chen Guilin), Qin Hailu(Shu Xian), Jang Shenyong(Xiao ju).

China, 107 minutes.

***Under the Dome* (穹顶之下 *Qiongdongzhixia*, 2015, Documentary)**

Directed by Chai Jing

Producer Ming Fan; *Narrator* Chai Jing.

China, 104 minutes.

III. Songography

Platform (站台 Zhantai) - [Lyrics by 黄浦生 Huang Pusheng, music by 刘克 Liu Ke],
Performer Lui Hong, 1987.

The Night of Ulan Bator (乌兰巴托的夜 Wulanbatuodeye) - [Lyrics by P. Sanduyjav,
music by G. Purrevdor],
Performer Zhao Tao, 2003.

Any Old Wine Bottles for Sale (酒干倘卖无 Jiugan Tang maiwu) – [Lyrics by 罗大佑
Luo Dayou and 侯德健 Hou Dejian], Theme song from Taiwanese film *Papa, Can you hear
Me Sing* in 1983.
Performer Su Rui, 1983.

Appendix B

Selected Newspaper Articles from Online People's Daily Graphic Database

I. Reform and Openness Policy

1. 改革和开放政策将振兴中国经济

Reform and Openness Will Revitalize Chinese Economy (1984, May 19th)

2. 改革和开放具有强大的生命力

Reform and Openness Have A Strong Vitality (1985, June 5th)

3. 改革是压倒一切的任务

Reform and Openness as The Top Priority (1985, July 20)

4. 改革开放与社会主义精神文明建设

Reform and Openness and Its Relationship with The Construction of Socialist Spirituality (1986, January 6)

5. 改革和建设必须在党领导下进行

The Reform Needs to Be implemented Under the Leadership of the CCP (1987, January 2)

6. 坚定不移的走自己的路

Walking on Our Path Unswervingly (1987, February 9; Yu Yiyun)

7. 加强改革开放的舆论宣传理论研究

Strengthening the Theoretical Research of Political Propaganda on Reform and Opening up (1987, May 24)

8. 我国国民经济在改变开放中稳步前进

Our Domestic Economy Has Been Developed Stably During the Reform and Opening up (1987, October 1)

9. 改革开放的总方针不会改变

Not Changing the Major Direction of Reform (1989, September 22)

10. 坚定不移继续改革开放

Continuing to Insist on the RO policy Unswervingly (1991, March 26)

11. 社会主义制度充满生机 我国改革开放成就巨大

Socialist System being Active -Having Great Achievements for the Reform and Openness Policy (1991, May 30; Lui Zhenying, Zou Aiguo)

II. Urbanization in China

1. 城市化加快：年增 800 万人 城市病渐重 生活诸多不便
Accelerating the Urbanization Process in China: 8 million more people every year; Having Increasing Number Cases of Urban Diseases; Having many inconveniences in Daily Life (1988, November 6; Feng Yuan)
2. 七五期间城市建设加快
Accelerating the Urbanization Process in China during the Seventh “Five-Year Plan” (1990, November 22; Wu Shisheng, Zhang Guorong)
3. 我国城市化进程加快
Accelerating the Urbanization Process in Our Country (1991, September 1; Lu Cairong)
4. 城市化与可持续发展
The Urbanization and Sustainable Development (1997, June 5; Zhou Guomei)
5. 城市化：中国经济增长的持久动力（观点）
Urbanization: the sustain motivation for economic development in China (1998, October 5; Hu Yuelong, Shi Ying)
6. 城市化进入快速发展阶段（新中国50年成就辉煌）
Urbanization Enters a Stage of Rapid Development (New China 50 Years of Glorious Achievements) (1999, August 26; Zhu Jianhong)
7. 留住城市的灵魂（文化遗产与城市发展述评）
Saving the Soul of Cities (Comments on the Cultural Heritage and Urbanization) (2000, July 11; Yang Xuemei)
8. 为什么要加快城镇化步伐
Why Speeding up the Steps of Urbanization Process (2001, April 5; Pan Gang)
9. 城市化建设实现新跨越的根本保证
The Fundamental Guarantee of New Leap Forward During the Urbanization (2002, July 9; Luo Guohua)
10. 也说城市化
Discussing about Urbanization (2004, August 20; Ren Yuling)
11. 加快城市化步伐势在必行
Accelerating the Pace of Urbanization is Imperative (2005, March 3, Wu Weizheng)

III. Migrant Workers

1. 广东打工不易 请勿听信谣言
It is Not Easy to Get a Job in Guangdong, Please Do not listen to and Believe in the Lore (1989, February 22; Liang Zhaoming)
2. 他们为什么涌进城
Why do They Rush into the Cities (1989, March 14; Wang Qingxian)
3. 大潮初落之后
After the First Wave (of Migration in China) (1989, April 13; Chen Jiyang, Chen Qiuzhong, Xu Baojian)
4. 民工死亡事故为何频繁发生
Why do Fatal Accidents of Migrant workers Happen Frequently (1993, November 27; Xu Xu, Li Yanxiu)
5. 一位民工投本书吐露心声
One person Wrote to this Newspaper to Express his Concern (1994, February 15; Ban Mingli)
6. 积极疏导协调 增加就业机会
Proactively Coordinate to Increase Employment Opportunities (1994, April 17; Zhang Hong)
7. 城里人看民工
How do City Residents see Migrant Workers? (1999, June 17; Fan Xiaoguo)
8. 关注民工合法权益
Concerning the Legitimate Rights and Interests of Migrant Workers (2002, January 9; Shi Guosheng)
9. 岂能如此歧视民工
How Can You Discriminate against Migrant Workers Like This? (2002, April 22; Liang Siqu)
10. 善待民工就是尊重劳动
Treating Migrant Workers Well Means Respecting Labour (2002, December 8; Jianda)

IV. The Three Gorges Dam

1. 中国的水力资源和建设水电站的优越条件
Water resources in China and favorable conditions for building waterpower plants
(1955, December 12; Li Yue)
2. 毛主席指明了征服长江的方向
Chairman Mar denoting the direction to conquer the Yangtze River (1978, December 23; Ling Yishan)
3. 保护长江鱼类资源刻不容缓
It is Urgent to Protect the Fish Resources in Yangtze River (1981, February 18; Wang Zhongren)
4. 三峡工程论证工作全部完成
The Investigative Work on the Three Gorges Dam Completely Finished (1989, March 8; Yang Lianghua, Wang Yantian)
5. 国际社会关注三峡工程 一批环保专家提出异议
International Concerns over the Three Gorges Project has been Raised by a Group of Environmental Experts (1989, March 16; Yang Lianghua)
6. 全国都要积极支援三峡工程
The Whole Country of China should actively support the Three Gorges Project (1992, November 21, Sun Benrao, Yu Chengjian)
7. 三峡库区移民有条件安置好
The Migrants of The Three Gorges Reservoir Area Could be Relocated Under Nice Conditions (1992, March 25; Li Boning)
8. 移民搬迁加快了三峡库区脱贫步伐-穷变富 田变多 路变通 房变洋
The Relocation of Migrants has Accelerated the Pace of Poverty Alleviation in the Three Gorges Reservoir area - The poor Have Become Richer, the Fields have Become more Fertile, the Roads have Become more Accessible, and The Houses have Become more Westernized (1997, February 21; Shi Yongfeng)
9. 三峡人·三峡魂-三峡工程建设者风采
The Three Gorges People, the Three Gorges Soul, and the Three Gorges Project Constructors' Demeanor (1997, November 20; Wu Yaming, Yang Shengle)
10. 三峡工程必须质量一流管理一流
The Three Gorges Project Must be of First-class Quality and Management (1999,

- October 14; Zhang Sutang, Fu Xu)
11. 三峡移民外迁盘子敲定
Finalization of the Relocation Plan (1999, November 18; Dong Jianqin)
 12. 三峡库区移民安置取得阶段性成果
The Relocation Plan of Citizens in Three Gorges Reservoir Area Has Achieved Milestones (2000, February 18; Jiang Xia)
 13. 特写：爆破拆迁前的千年古城
Feature: A Thousand-Year-Old City Before Demolition (2002, January 19)
 14. 库区巨变
The Massive Change of Three Gorges Reservoir Area (2003, May 28; Fan Weiguo)
 15. 三峡：创新写华章（经典中国-重点工程篇）
Three Gorges: Writing Chapters on Innovation (Classic China - Key Projects) (2005, September 5; Huang Zhengping, Zhu Juan)
 16. 筑起三峡的精神丰碑—记伟大的三峡移民精神
Building the spiritual monument of Three Gorges--The Spirit of the Great Three Gorges Migrants (2006, April 6; Zhu Juan)

V. Others

1. 向地球开战-诗歌
War on Earth – Poem (1958, April 8; Guo Moruo)
2. 如此「装洋相」
Why So Pretentious to be Western (1996, April 2; Ling Shigong)
3. 深刻认识构建社会主义和谐社会的重大意义
扎扎实实做好工作大力促进社会和谐团结
Deeply understand the significance of building a harmonious socialist society
Doing a solid job and vigorously promoting social harmony and unity (2005, February 20; Lan Hongguan)

Appendix C

Poem - *War On Earth*

向地球开战

War On Earth

作者：郭沫若, 1958年3月28日

Author: Guo Moruo, 1958/03/28

卓越的人民解放军的将士们，英雄们，
你们是六亿人民中的精华！
你们在党的领导下，在毛主席的教导下，
把帝国主义、封建主义、官僚资本主义的联军
打成个流水落花。

Distinguished soldiers and heroes of the
People's Liberation Army,
You're the best of 600 million people!
You, under the leadership of the Party and
the guidance of Chairman Mao, have
defeated the allied forces of imperialism,
feudalism and bureaucratic capitalism.

你们把中国的天下
变成了六亿人民的天下；
六亿人民作了主人，
谁不称赞你们是顶呱呱！
你们不仅有高度的武艺，
更还有高度的文化，
八年来祖国的生产建设、
文教建设的各条战线上，
哪一次伟大的战役没有你们在打？

You have turned China into a nation of 600
million people, and with 600 million people
as your masters,
you are hailed as the best!
You are not only good at fighting on the
battlefield but also are highly educated.
On all fronts of national construction
projects in the past 6 years,
has there ever been a great battle without
you fighting it?

一个胜利紧接着一个胜利，
一个革命紧接着一个革命，
你们才真不愧是不断的革命家！
现在你们有不少同志解甲归田，
不，你们是转换阵地，向地球开战。
毛主席说过：我们要先攻破地球表层，
然后再进入外层空间。
这样广阔无边的战场
已经展开在我们六亿人民的面前。
我国面积有一四四亿亩，
但现有耕地只占百分之二十还少一点。
我们的人口众多，平均分配虽然多过日本和英国，
但比美国和苏联就相差很远。
我们要大大地开垦，
南至海南岛，北至黑龙江边，
西至世界屋顶帕米尔高原。
海底和山顶都可以种植，

A victory followed by a victory,
A revolution followed by a revolution,
You are indeed revolutionists!
Many of you take off the armour and return
to home for farming.
No, you are changing the war field, starting
a war on Earth.
Chairman Mao used to say: we need to
conquer the surface of the Earth, and then
move to outer space.
Such a broad and endless war field has been
shown in front of our Chinese people.
The total territory (or under control) of
P.R.C is 10.45 million square kilometres,
but the farming land is less than 20% of the
total territory.
We have a large population and the average
farming land distribution is higher than
Japan and Britain, but it is far lower than the
United States and the Soviet Union.

大戈壁沙漠要设法变成良田。
六亿人民的力量可以移山倒海，

你们是卓越的战斗人员。
你们所领导的是国营农牧场，
一定要为全国的合作社示范。
要何况我们的地底还有无限的宝藏，
我们还要打开地下的仓库使宝物见天。
同志们，技术革命的号角吹响了，
我们要向科学技术大进军；
钢铁生产十五年要赶上英国，
科学技术十年内要赶上世界水平。
全中国的劳动人民都在鼓足干劲，力争上游，
农业和工业都出现着生产大跃进，
这形势就像解放了的原子能，
四处都在发生着链锁反应。

主席说：全民族发扬蹈厉，大有希望，
我们要以普通劳动者自处，跟踪前进！
是的，任何障碍都阻挡不了我们，
不管山怎么样高，水怎么样深，
火怎么样热，冰怎么样冷。
我们不是已经征服了长江，征服了秦岭？
高温的炼钢炉旁边，越热越振奋；
零下二十度也在进行水利工程？
三门峡和三峡要像小猫那样驯，
我们要看到汪洋的黄海转成一片天青。
是的，只有愚人的字典里面，
才能寻找得出这个字——“不可能”。

We need to develop the underdeveloped land, south to Hainan island, north to the riverside of the Amur River, west to the world roof of Pamir Mountains, doing farming at the bottom of oceans and the top of the mountains.

The great dessert will be managed to turn into good farming lands.

The power of 600 million Chinese people can remove mountains and fill up seas.

You are brilliant fighters.

You are leading state-owned farms which they must set an example for other national cooperatives.

Besides, there are unlimited treasures in the underground world.

We also have to open the underground warehouse to make the treasures useful.

Comrades, the trumpet of technical revolution blew,

We have to march towards science and technology, steel production has to catch up with Britain in five years, science and technology must catch up with the world average in the next few years.

The working people throughout China are fighting for upward social mobility.

It has been seen with the rapid progress in the production of agriculture and industry. This progressing situation is like the firing of nuclear power, which chain reactions are erupting everywhere.

There is hope for the whole nation, chairman Mao Said.

We need to self-claim ordinary workers and push ourselves forward.

Yes, no obstacle can stop us, no matter how high the peaks or how deep the water.

Haven't we already conquered the Yangtze River and the Qinling Mountains?

(We are) next to a high-temperature steel furnace, the hotter it gets, the more exhilarating (We are).

Aren't we constructing the hydro facilities even though it is -20 Celsius degree out there?

The Three Gorges and the Sanmenxia will be tamed like a kitten.

在今天，当然我们还只在国内活动，
到了明天，我们的情况就会大不相同。
我们要到南极冰原，也要到北极圈中，
还要到月球里去，访问广寒宫。
杨开慧和柳直荀烈士可能还在那儿作客，
是吴刚和嫦娥还在联合做东。
当然，那里一定有了苏联朋友，
中苏大联欢，红旗使宇宙通红。
毫无疑问，东风已经压倒了西风，
也就是西风都变成了东风。
和暖的东风永恒不息地吹送，
使全世界、全宇宙都一片春意葱茏。

人种已不分红、黄、黑、白、棕，
都是姊妹，都是弟兄。
当然，在那时也还会有矛盾存在，
但在人民内部总有办法通融。
别的星球或许也有人类更加进步，
我们要交流经验，争取宇宙大同。
同志们，这是不是幻想呢？
不，这正是马克思主义的造极登峰。
但我并不想多用来歌颂明天，
我只想多用力来在今天把你们歌颂。
赶快向地球开战吧，同志们，
无论在天涯海角，让我们陷阵冲锋！

We will see new landscapes in these areas.
Yes, the word "Impossible" only appears in
the dictionary of retarded people.

Today, we are only creating national
projects. Tomorrow, our situations will be
totally different. We will move our project
to the Antarctic ice field and also to the
Arctic circle.
We will land onto the Moon and visit the
Palace of Moon.
Yang Kaihui and Lui Zhixun maytr will be
visiting there, while Wu Gang and Chang Er
will be hosting them.
Sure, there will be our friends from the
Soviet Union over there too.
China and the Soviet Union will be
celebrating together. The red flag (of the
communist party) will make the whole
universe red.
There is no doubt that the east wind has
overwhelmed the west wind.
That is, all the west winds became east
winds.
And the warm east wind blows eternally,
which makes the whole world and the whole
universe feeling in springtime.

There will be no racial categories, and all
humans are sisters and brothers to each
other.
Sure, contradictions will also exist at that
time, but people will make things work.
There are maybe more civilized people
living on other planets.
We will communicate with them and strive
for the sameness for the whole universe.
Comrades, is this a hallucination?
No, it is exacting what Marxism is going to
create.
But I do not want to praise the life of the
future too much and I only want to praise
you (soldiers) today.
Let us start the War on Earth, comrades!
Let us start to fight no matter where we are.