

Post-modern Turn and Realist Transformation in Jia Zhang-ke's Films

Hui Xu

School of Design Art, Changsha University of Science and Technology,
Changsha 410114, Hunan, China

Corresponding author: Hui Xu (105809297@qq.com)

Abstract:

Following his *Hometown Trilogy*, Jia Zhang-ke's cinematic practice has entered a new phase of "oral history," marking an aesthetic shift from traditional realism to postmodern narrative strategies. Works such as *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew* exemplify this transition, employing meta-narrative techniques, including text-within-text, collage, and parody, to reconstruct historical imagery through postmodern stylistics. In *24 City*, the juxtaposition of fictional characters with authentic interviews achieves a threefold interpenetration of "reality-fiction-refiction," blurring the boundaries of narrative representation and challenging conventional distinctions between documentary and fictional modes. Conversely, *I Wish I Knew* activates viewers' narrative awareness through the embedding of classic film clips, the strategic use of diegetic mobile phone ringtones, and the temporal-spatial interlacing of historical fragments, creating a self-reflexive engagement with cinematic memory. At the level of memory construction, *I Wish I Knew* stages a dialectical contrast between the oral histories of 18 celebrities and elite descendants (individual memory) and the montage of canonical film excerpts (collective memory). This dual structure deconstructs monolithic historical narratives, revealing the polyphonic nature of historical representation and offering a "side history" that supplements official historiography. Yet, while works like *I Wish I Knew* sustain an investment in historical memory, Jia's refined cinematographic language and his adoption of an elite-centric narrative perspective in this period depart from the "grassroots ethos" of his earlier oeuvre. This shift weakens the realist impulse of his works and highlights the tension between postmodern formal experimentation and the realism that serves as the core of his creation. It can be seen from this that by reconstructing historical imagery through the prism of individual memory, Jia has not only expanded the narrative boundaries of Chinese cinema but also prompted critical reflection on the viability and adaptability of realism in the contemporary cultural context.

Keywords: Jia Zhang-ke; Post-modern narrative; Meta-narrative strategy; Individual memory and collective memory; Realism

Introduction

Jia Zhang-ke's *Hometown Trilogy*, including *Xiao Wu* (1998), *Platform* (2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), has established a highly recognizable realist style paradigm. Through the use of documentary-style imagery, dialectal dialogue, and long-take aesthetics, these films have become seminal works in the landscape of Chinese independent cinema. However, in *Jia Zhang-ke's Film Notes 1996-2008*, Jia himself acknowledges that this early-formed aesthetic style does not represent the ultimate goal of his artistic career. He posits, "Film creation should not be fettered by established styles; the essence of artistic exploration lies in breakthroughs and innovation" (Jia, 2009), signaling his intent to transcend the constraints of his initial creative mode. Even before he started filming his "Hometown" series, the desire to tell the stories of his hometown weighed heavily on his mind, like a stone pressing down on his heart. Only by turning these stories into films could he find peace. After the *Hometown Trilogy*, Jia was destined to continue telling other stories. However, he had no intention of giving up the realist style he had established. Instead, he aimed to keep filling the gaps in Chinese film history.

When Jia's creative focus expanded from the specific locale of Fenyang, Shanxi, to broader geographical and historical arenas, he encountered the limitations of realist aesthetics in non-localized contexts. Departing from the familiar backdrop of his hometown, the texture and expressive power of his film language underwent subtle yet significant transformations. As Dai Jinhua astutely observes in *Landscape in the Mist: Chinese Film Culture 1978-1998*, "The continuity and evolution of an authorial style are essentially reflections of changes in the cultural context" (Dai, 2006). This insight resonates strongly with Jia's creative transformation, underscoring how shifts in cultural context can precipitate aesthetic changes in filmmaking. Despite the challenges of aesthetic transformation, Jia has remained steadfast in his commitment to expanding the boundaries of realism. He conceives of his creative mission as filling the lacunae in Chinese film history, with a particular emphasis on documenting the folk memories of pivotal historical epochs, such as the Cultural Revolution. Guided by this overarching creative ethos, films like *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), *24 City* (2008), and *I Wish I Knew* (2010) engage in a continuous exploration of narrative innovation while preserving the core tenets of realism. In *The World*, Jia employs a collage-style spatial narrative to deconstruct the homogenizing effects of globalization, while *Still Life* utilizes intertextuality between documentary and fictional elements to

interrogate the rapid urban transformation in contemporary China. *24 City* blurs the lines between reality and fiction through its hybrid characterizations, and *I Wish I Knew* constructs a multi-layered historical tapestry via cross-media collages. Collectively, these films all safeguard the realist essence within the aesthetics of “hometown,” although their narrative strategies vary. Looking at Jia’s major films to date, the form of his realist film language has undergone changes since moving beyond the theme of “hometown.” When telling stories beyond the “hometown” context, Jia candidly admitted that he was torn when choosing the role of the narrator: “I was in a state of great conflict because there were two approaches. At first, I thought that using the perspective of an outsider was a more honest one. The other was the conventional perspective, where the narrator is well-versed in the place, the people, the events, as well as all the changes and growth. I couldn’t make up my mind which one to choose. In the end, I felt that I should go for honesty.” (Jia, 2009)

In the “oral history” creation stage, *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew* centrally reflect Jia’s in-depth practice of post-modern meta-narrative strategies. The two films make extensive use of techniques such as text-within-text, collage and parody to break the linear logic and authenticity boundary of traditional narrative. In *24 City*, the fictional character Gu Minhua played by Joan Chen is juxtaposed with the real interviews of factory workers. Through the triple narrative penetration of “reality- fiction-refiction”, the certainty of historical narrative is dissolved; *I Wish I Knew* embeds ten classic film clips such as *Red Persimmons* (1996) and *Two Stage Sisters* (1965). With the montage of interlacing time and space and modern elements such as mobile phone ringtones, it wakes up the audience’s cognitive of the constructiveness of history. This meta-narrative strategy not only deconstructs the authority of the single historical narrative, but also reconstructs the multi-dimensional picture of history through the dialogue between individual memory and collective memory. It is worth noting that the two films show significant differences in the choice of narrative subject. *24 City* continues Jia’s consistent grassroots perspective, focusing on the living difficulties and emotional memories of state-owned factory workers; while *I Wish I Knew* turns to the oral history of cultural elites such as Chen Danqing and Hou Hsiao-hsien and descendants of the elite. This change of narrative subject triggers the potential crisis of the realist core. The refined cinematography and elite-centric framing in *I Wish I Knew* starkly contrast with the “grassroots spirit” that characterized Jia’s earlier oeuvre, underscoring the latent tension between formal innovation and the realist impulse. This dichotomy ultimately signals the attenuation of realism’s discursive power in the post-modern context.

Jia's "oral history" creative practice is both an innovative expansion of realist aesthetics and a bold exploration of the possibility of post-modern narrative. While these works demonstrate remarkable formal ingenuity, the inherent contradictions in narrative subjectivity and historical representation lay bare the fundamental challenges confronting realist filmmaking in the post-modern era. As such, Jia's creative practice serves as a richly evocative case study, offering invaluable insights into the evolving aesthetic landscape of contemporary Chinese cinema.

Meta-Narrative Strategies and Historical Reconstruction

Since William H. Gass pioneered the concept of "metafiction" in *Fiction and the Figures of Life* (Gass, 1970), meta-narrative has emerged as a profoundly subversive creative technique in postmodern art, sparking enduring debates. Gass notes that a novel which takes fictional form itself as its subject matter is termed metafiction. Since then, Western literary theory has all but universally defined metafiction or metanarrative, without requiring elaborate explanation, as "a novel about novels" or "a narrative about narratives," emphasizing the self-reflexivity and self-awareness of fiction/narrative concerning its own formal structures. Gass contends that this phenomenon signals a crisis in the art of the novel. In fact, John Barth had already put forward a very similar view as early as 1967. In his essay "The Literature of Exhaustion", Barth lamented that novelists' practice of inverting the relationship between form and content signaled the impending decline of the art of the novel. (Barth, 1967) When extended to cinema, this narrative strategy not only deconstructs the boundaries of cinematic authenticity but also prompts audiences to reflect on the constructed nature of historical representation. After completing his *Hometown Trilogy*, Jia created *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew*, two films with distinct postmodern "metanarrative" characteristics, which integrate multiple interviews and oral histories. According to Gass's concept, these materials resemble "narratives" or "oral histories," while the films themselves serve as "metafictions" or "metanarratives" that reflect on the nature of storytelling. Does this shift signal a creative impasse? On the contrary, this formal experimentation embodies Jia's active response to the limitations of traditional realism. By embedding diverse discourses within cinematic frameworks, he not only expands the expressive possibilities of historical representation but also opens up a dialogic space between individual memories and collective histories. This transition is not a dilemma but a necessary exploration of how realism adapts to postmodern cultural contexts, demonstrating the vitality of his artistic vision.

In *24 City*, Jia's interviews with fictional characters played by celebrities exemplify William H. Gass's concept of "metafiction," where the novel uses fictional forms as its material. By juxtaposing interviews with real people and with fictional characters played by famous actors, the film blurs the boundary between reality and fiction. The character Gu Minhua, played by Joan Chen, is the most intricately constructed, crossing and shuttling between the barriers of reality and fiction, creating three layers of "penetration" between the two domains. First, Gu Minhua is nicknamed "Xiao Hua" due to her resemblance to the title character in *The Little Flower*, and the actress Joan Chen, who plays Gu Minhua, was the lead in the 1979 original film. This creates the first layer of "mutual penetration" between fiction and reality, marked by strong "self-reference" and self-awareness—Gu Minhua watches *The Little Flower* on TV in a filmic shot. As Jia recalls, Chen wept after filming this scene, her tears themselves blurring the boundary between fiction and reality. Second, Gu Minhua sadly recounts how colleagues fabricated a romantic story about her and a handsome man she never met, who died in a plane crash before arriving at Factory 420. This fictional romance cast a shadow over Gu Minhua's real life: she remained single thereafter. Third, Gu Minhua's life is further "pierced" by another fiction: a man infatuated with her writes love letters to himself under her name, signs them, and shows them to colleagues, causing the end of her relationship with her high-ranking boyfriend. Jia's fictional reality and layers of nested fictions thus mutually intersect and destabilize each other.

As Linda Hutcheon argues in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, such self-referential narration breaks the audience's blind trust in narrative authenticity by exposing its own narrative mechanisms, prompting reflection on the constructed nature of storytelling. (Hutcheon, 1988) Plot points such as Gu Minhua's recollection of colleagues fabricating romantic tragedies and others impersonating her name to write love letters further blur the line between fiction and reality, forming a triple narrative hierarchy of "reality-fiction-re-fictionalization." This intricate nesting of reality and fiction challenges the simplistic interpretation of authenticity in traditional realist cinema. By imbuing characters with an awareness of the fictionality of their own stories, Jia metaphorizes the constructed nature of historical narratives. For instance, when Gu Minhua's fictional monologues echo the actual experiences of factory workers recounted in interviews, the film exposes how historical accounts, whether personal or collective, are shaped by subjective perspectives and cultural memory. Jia's meta-narrative strategies are never mere formal experiments but are always rooted in real-world concerns. Zhang Yiwu notes in *Globalization and the Transformation of Chinese Cinema* that "the deconstructive essence of meta-narrative

constitutes a visual resistance to monolithic historical perspectives” (Zhang, 2006). In *24 City*, the rise and fall of state-owned factories and the collective memory of the working class gain new interpretive dimensions through the interlacing of reality and fiction. The fates of fictional characters become metaphors for real history, while the oral accounts of real people inject emotional weight into fictional narratives. This dynamic interplay not only humanizes the abstract process of industrial reform but also reflects on the loss of identity and community in China’s rapid modernization. By blending the personal with the historical, the film becomes a poignant meditation on how individual stories contribute to and complicate the grand narrative of national development.

I Wish I Knew represents a more avant-garde exploration of meta-narrative, constructing a cross-temporal memory network through techniques of “collage” and “textual layering.” The film interweaves 18 segments of oral history, clips from 10 classic films, and contemporary imagery to create a polyphonic dialogue between past and present. For example, when director Wang Tong recounts fleeing the mainland in 1949, the sudden intrusion of a mobile phone ringtone, a diegetic element from the present, ruptures the temporal and spatial boundaries between historical recollection, cinematic reenactment, and contemporary viewing. This treatment aligns with Jean Baudrillard’s theory of “hyperreality” in *Simulacra and Simulation*, which posits that through the infinite proliferation and collage of signs, the distinction between reality and representation collapses, creating a realm where “the map precedes the territory” (Baudrillard, 1981). In Jia’s film, the mobile phone ringtone serves as a metonymic reminder of the present’s inevitable mediation of the past, compelling viewers to confront the constructed nature of historical memory. The interspersing of Wei Ran’s reminiscences of her mother, the actress Shangguan Yunzhu, Zhao Tao’s portrayal of a nameless woman in a solitary rainy scene, and clips from classic films like *Two Stage Sisters* forms multiple layers of textual nesting. As Hayden White argues in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, historical narratives are fundamentally shaped by linguistic and tropological choices, with different narrative strategies producing distinct historical imaginaries (White, 2014). Jia’s collage technique deconstructs the unity of historical time, presenting history not as a linear progression but as a palimpsest of overlapping voices and images. For instance, when clips from *Two Stage Sisters*, a film about female solidarity during the Republican era, are juxtaposed with Wei Ran’s personal recollections of her mother’s persecution during the Cultural Revolution, the film underscores how collective myths and individual traumas coexist and interact in the construction of national memory.

This approach liberates history from monolithic grand narratives, instead presenting it as “peripheral history” that reveals the multifaceted nature of the past. However, Jia’s meta-narrative experimentation also exposes the latent tension between postmodern formalism and his realist roots. The film’s focus on cultural elites like Chen Danqing and Hou Hsiao-hsien starkly contrasts with the “grassroots perspective” of his earlier works, reflecting the challenges of expanding historical representation. As Zhou Xian observes in *The Genealogy of Aesthetic Modernity*, “excessive autonomy in formal experimentation may lead to a symbolic rupture between art and social reality” (Zhou, 2005). While elite voices provide nuanced perspectives on historical change, their dominance risks alienating the lived experiences of ordinary people. Jia navigates this tension by embedding elite testimonies within a framework of cinematic intertextuality, that is, classic film clips serve as a shared cultural vocabulary that bridges different social strata, even as the oral histories highlight their diverging perspectives. In *I Wish I Knew*, Jia pushes the boundaries of meta-narrative to interrogate the very foundations of historical representation. By juxtaposing personal recollections, cinematic artifacts, and contemporary signifiers, the film not only challenges the authenticity of historical accounts but also reflects on the evolving relationship between memory, art, and power in contemporary China. The tension between formal innovation and social commitment, while problematic, ultimately deepens the film’s critical engagement with history, positioning it as a pivotal work in the intersection of postmodern aesthetics and Chinese cinematic realism.

Jia’s exploration of meta-narrative strategies in *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew* represents a pivotal breakthrough in Chinese cinematic narrative traditions, infusing realist aesthetics with renewed dynamism. While his formal experimentation and sociopolitical engagement remain subjects of critical debate, this body of work offers valuable paradigms for contemporary cinema to navigate historical memory and reconstruct realistic representation. By interweaving self-reflexive techniques with documentary-inspired storytelling, these films challenge conventional boundaries between fact and fiction, prompting audiences to reflect on the constructed nature of historical discourse. Looking ahead, the central inquiry in analyzing Jia’s creative evolution lies in deciphering how he balances innovative narrative structures with the humanistic core of realism, a tension that encapsulates broader theoretical discussions about the ethical and aesthetic responsibilities of cinematic historiography in the globalized era.

The Interaction and Fusion of Individual Memory and Collective Memory

Jia's entanglement with history is first reflected in his contemplation of time and space. When space loses its sense of time, and when the present within that space is disconnected from the past, how do we preserve memory in such an environment? Jia's nine feature films to date have all been meditations on this question. The locations chosen for these films have also evolved: Shanxi in the *Hometown Trilogy*, Beijing's World Park in *The World*, the erasure of collective memory in Fengjie due to the Three Gorges Project in *Still Life*, the dismantling of industrial heritage at Chengdu's Factory 420 in *24 City* and the multi-layered deconstruction of Shanghai's historical imaginary in *I Wish I Knew*. Driven by the same sense of urgency, Jia ventures beyond Shanxi to document Fengjie, a city being submerged by the Three Gorges Project; Chengdu's Factory 420, which is undergoing demolition; and Shanghai, a city increasingly resembling Tokyo or New York in appearance. Walking through these cities, Jia searches for traces of their pasts. But the "bygone days" are elusive, being replaced and erased by ever-changing new architecture. Jia fears that China's "past" will gradually be supplanted by "modernity," and he is anxious that the identities of many cities will vanish in the process of modernization. He attempts to use his camera to document China's "present" as a way to preserve the past: the "present" will soon fade, and "today" will in the blink of an eye become the past. Jia hopes his films can serve as hard drives of memory: if in China's urban spaces the past and present are no longer connected, these memory drives will preserve some of the memories that China is bound to lose after integrating into the 21st century, providing a record of the interaction between a yesterday that will no longer exist in the urban spaces of many Chinese cities and the present.

In *The Condition of Postmodernity*, David Harvey posits that "time-space compression" is a defining characteristic of modernity, leading to the radical transformation and often brutal erasure of urban historical textures. (Harvey, 1989) This theoretical framework aptly elucidates the urban metamorphosis witnessed in contemporary China, where rapid urbanization has condensed decades of development into mere years. Shenzhen serves as a paradigmatic case study. Transitioning from a modest border town to a global megacity within a few decades, the city's swift ascent entailed large-scale demolitions of old neighborhoods and buildings. These architectural upheavals not only physically reconfigured the cityscape but also severed the collective memories deeply ingrained within these spaces. The original living environments, repositories of local culture and communal life, were supplanted by modern skyscrapers and standardized urban forms,

embodying the destructive consequences of space-time compression as theorized by Harvey.

Jia, a perceptive chronicler of urban change, employs cinema as a means to counteract this memory loss. Conceptualizing film as a “hard disk of memory,” he meticulously documents the present, seeking to preserve the historical imprints imperiled by 21st-century urbanization. Through his films, Jia reconstructs the fragmented temporal narratives within urban spaces, challenging the disruptions wrought by space-time compression. His recurrent use of close-up shots of demolition sites and decrepit buildings transcends mere visual documentation; it constitutes a form of cultural salvage, rescuing vanishing historical memories from the brink of oblivion. In this way, Jia’s cinematic practice aligns with Harvey’s insights, illustrating how the rapid reconfiguration of space disrupts memory, and how art can serve as a bulwark against such erasure.

This phenomenon aligns with Maurice Halbwachs’ theory of collective memory. In *On Collective Memory*, Halbwachs posits that the “fixity” of space is integral to memory accumulation, creating an illusion of temporal stability that facilitates memory evocation. (Halbwachs, 2002) However, the large-scale urban renovations and new district expansions in modern China shatter this “fixity.” Shanghai, a vanguard of China’s modernization, exemplifies this memory dilemma. The gradual replacement of iconic Shikumen (石库门) alleyways and historic Bund buildings with skyscrapers during urban renewal threatens to reshape or efface the city’s rich urban memory. Jia’s *I Wish I Knew* probes this tension, underscoring the imperative of reconciling modern development with cultural heritage preservation to safeguard the collective memories that underpin a city’s identity.

I Wish I Knew aims to unfold Shanghai’s history through both “collective” and “individual” lenses. Halbwachs conceptualizes memory into two tiers: the first tier is personal memory, primarily tied to an individual’s life experiences; the second is collective memory, constituted by shared recollections among those who experienced the same events and the objective traces left by these events, such as related spaces, institutional legacies, written records, and oral archives. The ten cinematic fragments assembled in *I Wish I Knew* exemplify “collective memory.” However, as a key function of collective memory is to reconstruct the past to fulfill contemporary spiritual needs, it inherently carries subjectivity. For instance, mainland China’s memory of Shanghai in 1949 is framed as joyous scenes of liberation, while Taiwan’s memory of the same year is etched with images of grand defeat and forced exile. The Shanghai history presented in *I Wish I Knew*, in this author’s view, emerges

from the interplay between “ten films and eighteen oral histories”—the “collective memory” represented by the ten films must incorporate the “personal memories” embedded in the eighteen oral histories as interpretation and supplementation. Jia asserts that *I Wish I Knew* is not a chronicle of Shanghai. Superficially, the film’s profusion of personal interviews resembles a mosaic of vignettes the city’s legend. The narrative focal points it seeks to explore are 1949 and the Cultural Revolution. The film opens with a pair of stone lions gazing, a visual motif symbolizing Jia’s perspective and lens. This is followed by the ambient noise of a ferry, close-ups of passengers’ faces, and Zhao Tao’s visage partially obscured by a folding fan as she stares at a ship vanishing into the mist. A subsequent long shot captures Zhao Tao walking along a renovated riverfront, approaching a city she is about to explore. The oral histories in the film trace back as far as the 1930s, while Shanghai’s more distant treaty-port history is evoked through a series of evocative shots: slow-motion close-ups of dockworkers shouldering cement, and photographic portraits of an elderly man framed by an ancient bronze door lock. In the oral accounts of Yang Xiaofu and Zhang Yuansun, the 1930s emerge as a legendary era rife with assassinations and patriotic fervor. Yet Jia’s narrative emphasis remains firmly on 1949.

Referred to as “China’s poet of cinema” by American film critic Dudley Andrew, Jia emerges as a bard of urban ruins, consistently probing the wounds of memory and articulating the sensations of pain. In *I Wish I Knew*, half of the eighteen interviewees hail from Taiwan and Hong Kong. Their recollections of 1949 are suffused with the searing pain of separation from the Chinese mainland, forming a spectrum of agony with varying hues and intensities. Director Wang Tong’s memory of fleeing the mainland in 1949 encapsulates this trauma: “My grandmother tied the children together with a rope, stringing the eight of us like eight zongzi.” Jia contends that history and sociology often lack emotional depth, emphasizing that affect constitutes the lifeblood of cinema. In curating oral histories, he gravitates toward emotionally charged details that etch indelible impressions, as exemplified by the poignant imagery of the rope and zongzi (粽子), which lays bare the wounds of departure from Shanghai in 1949.

I Wish I Knew presents a dual perspective on 1949: oral accounts from Taiwan evoke “tearful partings,” while those from Shanghai convey “heartrending goodbyes.” Historical memory of this pivotal year resembles Janus, the two-faced Roman god, one visage beams with the joy of Shanghai’s liberation, while the other weeps with the sorrows of the displaced. A clip from *The Battle of Shanghai* (1959) represents the collective memory of liberation, juxtaposed against Wang Peimin’s personal

recollection of her father, who was executed by Nationalist forces at the age of twenty-four. These two narratives, separated by six decades (1949 and 2009), converge on Nanjing Road: the middle-aged daughter stands before a shop window, gazing across time for a father she never met. As Wang Peimin stands on 21st-century Nanjing Road, the glass reflects images of People's Liberation Army soldiers entering the city in 1949, accompanied by the historical sounds of military chants. Her choked reminiscences serve as a poignant footnote to *The Battle of Shanghai*. The black-and-white photograph of her young father's serene smile before his execution, followed by his lifeless body in a pool of blood, shocks the viewer. This harrowing image then intercuts with celebratory scenes from *The Battle of Shanghai*, where jubilant crowds and fireworks symbolize the collective memory of liberation. As audiences watch these festive images, the specter of Wang Peimin's mother, a woman driven insane by her husband's death, lingers, trailing the PLA troops in a deluded hope of his return.

The Cultural Revolution, a profound scar on contemporary Chinese history, has inspired numerous artistic explorations. Jia revisits this painful chapter in *I Wish I Knew*. Zhu Qiansheng's memories of working as Michelangelo Antonioni's assistant add nuance to Antonioni's controversial documentary China. Zhu's rueful smile hints at unspoken traumas—did Antonioni, upon leaving China, ever learn that his Chinese collaborator would face persecution during the Cultural Revolution? Huang Baomei's recollections provide a contrasting perspective, offering lighthearted anecdotes of her momentous meeting with Mao Zedong. Despite her own experiences of persecution during the Cultural Revolution, her jovial narrative eschews bitterness. The film's artful mise-en-scène enhances this contrast: as Huang recalls her encounter with Mao, the opulent Shanghai City Hall serves as a backdrop, transitioning seamlessly to her solitary walk through the ruins of a demolished textile factory. These industrial ruins echo the decaying factory spaces in *24 City*, yet a fade-out reveals a new generation of Shanghai workers crossing the river by ferry, set against the backdrop of a modern, gleaming metropolis.

Wei Wei, son of the actress Shangguan Yunzhu, calmly recounts the fates of his mother, sister, and niece during the Cultural Revolution. His resemblance to Shangguan Yunzhu amplifies the tragedy, as his understated grief renders the three-generation saga all the more heartrending. Jia masterfully interweaves three visual threads: clips from *Two Stage Sisters*, Zhao Tao wandering aimlessly in the rain, and Wei Wei sharing his family's story in an empty theater, seamlessly blending collective and personal memories. Jia's reference to *Two Stage Sisters* also pays homage to director Xie Jin, who suffered brutal persecution during the Cultural

Revolution for making the film. For audiences familiar with Chinese film history, these references to *Two Stage Sisters* unfold as a quadrilogy of Cultural Revolution tragedies, encompassing Shangguan Yunzhu, her daughter, her granddaughter, and Xie Jin himself.

Jia's inclusion of *The Story of a Small Town* (1979) further reveals his cinephilic devotion. This cinematic masterpiece, overlooked for decades prior to the 1980s, prompts actress Wei Wei to share off-screen anecdotes, including her co-star's lingering infatuation. However, director Fei Mu's daughter's halting recollections and pregnant silences hint at a darker truth, the artist's premature death due to professional frustration. These unspoken words and pauses carry more weight than explicit narration, embodying the film's nuanced approach to historical memory.

As a film artist rather than a historian, Jia's *I Wish I Knew* finds its success not in uncovering new historical facts but in its innovative cinematic form. Employing postmodern techniques such as nested narratives, spatial disruptions, and textual pastiche, alongside its dual historical perspectives of individual and collective memory, the film aims to present a comprehensive historical panorama. By using individual memories to supplement collective narratives, Jia creates a dialogic relationship between the two, inviting viewers to actively engage in historical interpretation. True historical understanding, according to the film, necessitates audience participation in the construction of meaning. *I Wish I Knew* presumes a certain level of knowledge about Chinese history and film among its viewers, a presumption that, coupled with its complex formal experiments, may pose challenges for some audiences. Yet, it is precisely through these formal and narrative strategies that the film compels viewers to confront the multifaceted nature of historical memory, blurring the boundaries between past and present, individual and collective, fact and emotion.

The Turn and Reconstruction of Historical Imagery

As the works of Jia's "oral history" stage, *24 City* and *I Wish I Knew* share the "meta-narrative" strategy in the post-modern art form experiment, presenting new images of history through individual memories. These two works in Jia's "oral history" stage seem to have put a halo of history on him. However, upon closer inspection, the color of realism has begun to fade away quietly in Jia's latest historical image *I Wish I Knew*. Ruins have always been a shocking background in Jia's films. *Still Life* filmed the flooding and demolition of Fengjie, which is a nightmare about the ruins of Fengjie and a elegy to the scenery of the Three Gorges. Although there have been great changes in the narrative techniques and external forms of the

film, *24 City* is still, like *Still Life*, an image about ruins and demolition. As a “proposition-based work” for the Shanghai World Expo, *I Wish I Knew* is different from Jia’s previous films. It focuses more on presenting a fashionable and clean Shanghai that has little difference from New York, Hong Kong or Tokyo. The rough images in Jia’s previous films have disappeared. The Shanghai World Expo provided Jia with sufficient funds to conduct interviews and location-scouting in Taiwan, Hong Kong and other places. The background and composition of *I Wish I Knew* are very elaborate. Zhao Tao is always ready to strike a pose on the overpass or on the street, waiting for the director to shoot when the light is at its best. The focus of all the shots in *I Wish I Knew* is also just right, capturing the most delicate emotions in the air. Whether it is on the ferry, at the port, in the teahouse, in the alley, or in each interview, the shots are perfect, but they lose the natural sense of Jia’s films. The camera always slowly approaches or moves away from the characters it is shooting. The interviewees are all dressed exquisitely, and their oral accounts are all very smooth, without even any inappropriate words. The perfection of *I Wish I Knew* becomes its only flaw because it lacks the natural roughness of Jia’s films.

Before *I Wish I Knew*, the people Jia focused on were those living on the ruins. In *I Wish I Knew*, the people he focused on changed. Obviously, this film aims to explore and understand a legendary Shanghai. Of course, they are not the legendary stories of ordinary people. Although the screen presents countless portraits of Shanghai residents in public spaces, the narratives of dock workers laboring with cement loads are absent from the audio. The people *I Wish I Knew* focuses on are no longer “grass-roots”, but all social celebrities or their descendants. Jia has also changed from the “buddy” of “Xiao Wu” to the friend of Chen Danqing and Hou Hsiao-hsien. The interview with Chen Danqing is necessary. First, Chen Danqing is from Shanghai. Second, his memories lead to the next group of shots depicting the life in Shanghai’s alleys. Hou Hsiao-hsien is a Taiwanese with ancestral roots in Guangdong. He also admits in the film interview that “in fact, my impression of Shanghai comes from my involvement in shooting *Flowers of Shanghai*. I knew nothing about Shanghai before that.” Moreover, *Flowers of Shanghai* tells a story that took place in Shanghai in the Qing Dynasty, which has little connection with today’s Shanghai. Jia reluctantly intercepted a painting of Yuyuan Garden in *Flowers of Shanghai* (1986) and faded it into Zhu Qiansheng (i.e., the guide of Antonioni in China back then) sitting in Yuyuan Garden, intending to make Hou Hsiao-hsien’s interview and the reference to *Flowers of Shanghai* naturally integrated into *I Wish I Knew*. From the Qing Dynasty in the 19th century to the “Cultural Revolution” in the 21st century, from Hou Hsiao-hsien to Antonioni, the Shanghai that Jia explored is a

Shanghai of celebrities and cultural elites. Jia admits that he has listened to the advice of Chen Danqing, the art consultant of the film: interview more celebrities in the cultural circle. But is the legend of Shanghai only written by celebrities and elites?

Huang Baomei is the only worker interviewed in *I Wish I Knew*. When she walked through the factories and workshops where she had worked for 40 years, she did not show any sadness. She was still the happy model worker in Xie Jin's films, and her tone of speech was very different from that of the workers in *24 City*. Although Jia brought the post-modern meta-narrative technique from Chengdu to Shanghai and injected the concepts of historical research such as "personal history" and "collective history" into *I Wish I Knew*, he has distanced himself from those silent working-class individuals. In the oral history segments of *24 City*, Jia's questioning voice remained audible during worker interviews, yet such vocal presence is entirely absent in *I Wish I Knew*. The "optimistic model worker" image of Huang Baomei forms a rupture with the anxious and disillusioned narratives of workers in *24 City*, which may reflect another dimension of the director's attention to the realities of the grassroots. This character's account predominantly exhibits the characteristics of official discourse shaped by history. Under this discursive construction, there is a narrative distance between her image and the authentic emotional memories of individual workers.

In his creative practice of *I Wish I Knew*, Jia shifts the narrative focus to the presentation of celebrities' "legends" while drastically reducing the proportion of his original footage and incorporating ten film clips created by others. This unique textual structure not only renders the film in a state of what Roland Barthes (1968) termed "the death of the author" but also sparks reflections on the transformation of his realist creative paradigm: does this creative strategy signify that Jia's exploration of realism has reached a certain boundary? In terms of narrative strategy, the withdrawal of the creator's voice and the collage of classic clips significantly weaken the film's engagement with reality. The critical edge and humanistic care that were once distinctive features of Jia's works are gradually diluted amid the interweaving of elite discourse and historical fragments. This shift in creative approach is not merely a personal artistic choice but also reflects the profound transformations in the cultural production mechanisms during China's social transition. In the dual context of consumerism and cultural pluralism, film creation is inevitably influenced by market logic and mainstream discourse, raising the question of how to strike a balance between artistic expression and external demands, a crucial issue confronting contemporary filmmakers like Jia Zhang-ke.

Conclusion

Jia Zhang-ke's creative trajectory reflects the profound and arduous process of Chinese cinema's breakthrough amid the collision of globalization and local culture. His later works' exploration of postmodern meta-narratives essentially deconstructs traditional historical writing mechanisms. Through the interweaving of fiction and reality, and the fragmentation and recombination of temporal-spatial dimensions, they transform linear historical narratives into a prismatic, three-dimensional presentation. This innovation not only expands the expressive boundaries of film as a historical medium but also compels audiences to critically re-examine the power discourses behind historical construction, opening up new narrative possibilities for Chinese cinema. However, beneath this formal innovation lies a deeper cultural dilemma. When postmodern aesthetics deconstruct the gravitas of realism in the name of deconstruction, the tension between artistic expression and social reality gradually emerges. The decline of grassroots perspectives and the introduction of elite discourse in Jia's later works actually expose the value paradox faced by contemporary film creators in pursuit of avant-garde ideas: amid the wave of technological innovation and artistic experimentation, the challenge of preventing realism from degenerating into an empty aesthetic symbol while preserving works' keen engagement with social reality and humanistic care demands critical reflection on the dialectical relationship between form and content. This contradiction is not unique to Jia but represents a shared challenge across contemporary Chinese film and even the broader literary and artistic creation landscape. From a macro perspective, Jia's practice offers significant insights: the future development of Chinese cinema requires absorbing the beneficial elements of postmodern aesthetics while adhering to the spiritual core of realism, thus constructing a creative paradigm that integrates formal innovation with realistic warmth. Only by establishing a dynamic balance between artistic exploration and social responsibility can Chinese cinema truly fulfill its cultural mission of documenting the era, reflecting reality, and inspiring reflection, and carve out a unique chapter in the global cinematic landscape.

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