Bildungsroman in the Films of Jia Zhangke: A Study of the Transformation of Chinese Youth Culture

by

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Introduction: An Overview of Chinese Film History and the Sixth Generation Filmmakers

In this study I wish to examine how the work of Jia Zhangke reflects, through its unique and definitive content and visual style, the influence of globalization, consumerism, and international popular culture on the outlook and value systems of a new group of young people growing up in a post-1989 society. By applying the concept of the Bildungsroman, I hope to explore these concerns by looking at how his young protagonists deal with the universal problems of coming of age, sexuality, and the search for identity. I hope to not only to discover what Jia’s films have to say about contemporary Chinese culture, but also to shed new light on the Bildungsroman as a genre.

I will begin, however, by introducing the historical framework from which his films have emerged. In China, film has historically served as both a source of bourgeois and peasant entertainment and as a medium strongly intertwined with politics. Shanghai came to prominence early as the center of the country’s film base, and by the 1930s it already had a well-established industry. On the political front, film served as a central medium to the Chinese Left, and infiltrating the industry was a top Communist Party priority, since film was seen as one of the most effective ways of opening up social divisions and promoting anti-Japanese resistance. Most of the industry films from the 1930s, now referred to as the first “golden period” of Chinese cinema, were written and directed by underground leftists.¹

The film industry was an equally important battleground during the civil war years of the late 1940s, called the “second golden period”, when left-wing film companies like Kunlun and Wenhua regularly released films that implicitly demanded radical solutions to social problems, often necessitating bribes to government censors in order to let them be made. It followed that the Party began establishing a new film industry as soon as it came to power in 1949, appropriating old studios and building new ones in several major Chinese city centers.²

Films of both political slants made in Shanghai before 1949 had been addressed to a comparatively sophisticated and educated urban audience, for the simple reason that the cinemas to screen them existed only in the cities.³ The Communist Party, looking to win hearts and minds in the vast rural areas, addressed its new cinema primarily to the rural audience and urban working class; this Realist Cinema used simple, didactic stories and language, and was designed both to overturn centuries of feudal tradition and to pave the way for a huge program of reforms, ranging from the new marriage law to campaigns to eliminating specific diseases. The model for this new cinema, as the Chinese filmmakers sent to study at the VGIK film school in Moscow soon discovered, was the Soviet line in “socialist realism” as developed under Stalin in the 1930s and still very current in the 1950s. The Party took all necessary steps to bring this new cinema to the people: cinemas were built in every township and village, or at least public screenings were established.

² Zhang Yingjin, Chinese National Cinema (Routledge, 2004), 70-72.
Copies of films were supplied through a small-gauge distribution, which enabled films to be carried to the remotest areas of the country.  

Although the Soviet influence was strong in early years, the shortage of trained and competent filmmaking personnel was initially a problem, with many of the experienced veterans already having fled to Hong Kong during the 1947 Japanese invasion of Shanghai.

China thus founded its own film school in 1956, under the Ministry of Culture. Much like students enrolled at the Beijing Film Academy today, students then were taught film practice, theory, and history; this was in addition to political economy, ideological theory, and Communist Party history. They were trained, in short, to make the kind of films the government needed. The resulting films produced in the 1950s and 1960s are often critiqued by current filmmakers and artists as overly theatrical, composed, and didactic.

Like the film studios and all other institutions in Chinese cinema, the film school was closed down in 1966 by the early battles of the Cultural Revolution. The school reopened in 1978, and the block of students who graduated in 1982 were part of its first “post-Cultural Revolution” intake. It was several members of this 1982 graduating class that came to make up “The Fifth Generation” of filmmakers.

The notion of dividing Chinese film history into a series of “generations” was borrowed from Li Zehou’s book *On the History of Modern Chinese Thought*, which

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7 Zhang, 60-61.
similarly categorizes the changes and developments of the twentieth century by associating them with successive generations of thinkers. Professor Ni Zhen in his Memoirs from the Beijing Film Academy defines this system in more detail:

The separation of generations [is] based not only on physiological age, but defines cultural characteristics and social consciousness: clear differences in political thinking, cultural consciousness, and film aesthetics.8

Following these guidelines, Chinese film history can be classified into five generations. The First Generation was composed of the pioneers who founded the Chinese film industry in the 1920s, including Zhang Shichuan and Zheng Zhengqiu. The Second Generation included the screenwriters and directors like Xia Yan and Cai Chusheng who produced the progressive and often left wing films in the 1930s and late 1940s. The Third Generation referred to the filmmakers who produced work for the communist cinema of the 1950s and early 1960s, and the Fourth Generation was composed of those filmmakers trained in the 1950s whose careers were derailed by the Cultural Revolution and only had a short window in the early 1980s to make their mark, including Wu Tianming, Wu Yigong, and Xie Fei.9

The class of Fifth Generation graduates, however, were able to put out a few major films which quickly distanced them and their work from that of their Chinese filmmaking predecessors, earning this new generation of filmmakers the role as leaders of Chinese cinema’s “New Wave.”10 The reason this group was able to make such a swift and momentous impact was due to a unique set of circumstances. First, the Beijing Film

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8 Ni, 188-189.
Academy was re-opened in 1978 as part of the government’s Open-Door Policy, which began with the goal of introducing to China Western science, technology, capital, management skills, and inevitably, as seen even in the large variety of films students at the Academy were given access to, Western thoughts and cultural products. Because these filmmakers were part of the Film Academy’s first graduating class since 1966, they represent the best of a wealth of talented and passionate Chinese students who had been collecting with no outlet for over a decade.\footnote{Ni, 149.}

Since the Film Academy’s first re-opening years saw a shortage of equipment, students often learned film technique by watching foreign movies. The Academy’s huge film archive gave them instant access to films spanning a wide variety of genres, particularly Italian Neo-Realism, French New Wave, and Soviet montage, in addition to popular American fare including Hollywood melodramas and blockbusters.\footnote{Ni, 97-98.} Further, the already-established old rank system which existed in the older and largest state-run studios, such as those in Beijing, Shanghai, and Changchun, usually meant that graduates entering the field would have to endure being assistant directors without any hope of showing their own faces for at least eight to ten years. The recently re-opened studios in provinces far from these major cities, however, needed huge numbers of new staff, allowing the Academy to send groups of its very best young people to bypass the rank system and start making films immediately.\footnote{Ni, 148-149.} It was a group like this sent to the studio in Guangxi who produced the 1983 film One and Eight (Yi ge he Ba ge, 1983), one of the Fifth Generation’s first defining films.\footnote{Zhu, 463.} Other films produced during this time included...
Tian Zhuangzhuang’s *Horse Thief* (Dao Ma Zei 1986), Chen Kaige’s *King of Children* (Haizi Wang 1987), and Zhang Yimou’s *Red Sorghum* (Hong Gao Liang 1987).\(^{15}\)

Fifth Generation filmmakers were most notable in their separation from wanted to fully reject the film conventions touted by the socialist system, and they were eager to innovate and pose a challenge to the film establishment. As Zhang Yimou stated in a later interview, he and fellow young filmmakers “definitely wanted to rebel” against the older generation.\(^{16}\) One distinction was that these New Wave directors were motivated by a strong artistic concern rather than a political one. Films such as *Red Sorghum* and Chen Kaige’s *Yellow Earth* (Huang Tudi, 1984) highlight bold artistic experimentation, using conspicuous cinematic devices, cinematography, and composition featuring bright color contrast, framing, extreme long shots, and camera mobility, highlighting the conscious importance placed on film technique and art. This exaggerated emphasis on artistic spectacle also contributed to the grand epic quality associated much of the Fifth Generation’s work.

Associated with this visual epic quality was perhaps the most notable trend of the Fifth generation, the appraisal and reinterpretation of history within their films. Dealing with historical situations or settings, many reflected a new historical consciousness and often employed this setting as part of an allegorical framework. *Yellow Earth*, for instance, depicts the story of a communist soldier’s encounter with a peasant family which is full of tensions and ironies; its allegorical structure that reveals with great subtlety the contradictions within this alliance. *One and Eight* also deals with a historical

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setting, Northern China during the Second World War, but uses this setting to create a psychological time and space within which the conflict between ideology and human need is played out.  

This film reflects another characteristic of the Fifth Generation: a strong interest in the atemporal dimension of history and a static, monistic view of culture. They are more concerned with the basic structure of a society that remains unchanged or resists change than with the contradictions existing within that society which precipitate change. This, we will see, is just one of the essential differences between the films of this group and the work put out by the Sixth Generation.

This “New Wave” of Chinese film wasn’t the only movement stimulated by the Open-Door Policy: the Film Academy’s students were also graduating and making their first films in the midst of an introspective literary movement of root-seeking, lasting from the early to mid 1980s. Influenced by Faulkner and Garcia Marquez, the “root seeking” movement sought to understand how the Chinese culture came into being and to discover the origins of “Chineseness”. Many of the Fifth Generation New Wave films can be read as a response to such a prevailing literary mood, turning film focus away from cosmopolitan urban centers and to the provincial and rural areas. There was further a focus on traditional culture and ethnic spectacle, as seen for instance in Tian Zhuangzhuang’s On the Hunting Ground (Lie chang zha sha, 1984) and Horse Thief (Dao Ma Zei, 1986). Further, directors directly adapted fictions by root-seeking writers

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18 Ma, 33-34.
19 Zhu, 458.
such as Ah Cheng (*King of the Children*, Chen Kaige, 1988) and Muo Yan (*Red Sorghum*).

Much as these Fifth Generation directors had the urge to express an artistic individuality and separate their work as unique and different from that of their predecessors, so a new group of filmmakers began to emerge after 1989 with the same goal. They too sought to differentiate themselves from their predecessors, who in this case happened to be members of the Fifth Generation. The Tiananmen Square massacre in Beijing, happening in the spring of 1989, marked a turning point for film: it was in 1989 that filmmakers like Zhang Yuan and He Jianjun, who were in their twenties in the spring of 1989, started putting out low-budget films which set in motion the informal movement known as the Sixth Generation. This group, made up of young professional filmmakers born in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was part of a larger turning point for Chinese art: For the first time since the communists took over China in 1949, a significant number of young artist began producing work outside the system of state control.

According to the system specified by Li Zehou and other scholars classifying film history into generations, the term “Sixth Generation” was coined to set the work of this new group apart from the nostalgic, exotic images of China created by the Fifth Generation filmmakers. Tony Rayns, however, criticizes this generational analysis as a blinkered, communist-inspired construct, which leaves out Hong Kong and Taiwanese filmmakers and makes no distinction between directors working in creative independence and directors working under communist orders. He argues that the “underground”

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filmmakers of the 1990s and 2000s should not be co-opted into a “communist-inspired account of Chinese film history”.\textsuperscript{21}

Professor Cui Shuqin, however, argues that labeling new-generation filmmakers as “underground” or “independent” is also fraught with contradictions. To make a film in China today, she argues, directors must negotiate between personal and mainstream production, domestic reception and international recognition, capital resources and marked distribution.\textsuperscript{22}

In fact, official cinema and this often-banned independent film have coexisted uneasily for over a decade. While there was reform brought about in the exhibition and distribution sectors beginning in the early and mid-1980s, the studios were until 2002 still the only “work units” authorized to produce films. The 1993 reforms, however, instructed the studios to stop relying on government funding, market their own products, and turn a profit. Lacking experience and being thrown into a capitalist market, studio executives often proved unqualified to face these new economic challenges. They resorted to selling their production quotas to the private companies that started to appear aboveground in the mid-1990s. In exchange, the studios’ names were attached to the films. This set-up, however, became obsolete in February 2002, when the regulations on administration of the film industry were modified, allowing private production companies to apply directly to the Film Bureau for a permit and putting an end to the monopoly held by the studios since 1953.\textsuperscript{23} Therefore, since 2002, a new hybrid sector has developed in which

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{21} Rayns, 2.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Cui, Shuqin, "Negotiating In-Between: On New-Generation Filmmaking and Jia Zhangke's Films," \textit{Modern Chinese Literature and Culture} 18, no. 2 (Fall 2006), 98.
\item \textsuperscript{23} The Radio and Television Bureau released a set of four temporary orders in 2003 specifying these changes, including one regarding private investment directly into film production, publication, and distribution (Dianying zhipian, faxing, fangying jingying zige zhuru zanxing guiding), and one regarding
\end{itemize}
commercial and art films explore the multiple facets of a rapidly changing society, but over which the shadow of censorship still lingers. Most directors of the new generation, whose works had previously been cut off from audiences and neglected by the mainstream, now seek all possible means to survive and succeed, making films both inside and outside the system. Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Shanghai Dreams* (Qinghong, 2005) and Jia Zhangke’s *The World* (Shijie, 2005) are two examples of cooperative relationships between individual directors and mainstream film production. According to Jia, he agreed to work aboveground because he wanted his films to be viewed beyond the confines of international art-house venues; he wanted the Chinese people to see his work: “If you reach a wider audience, you have to go through the system,” Jia said. “It’s just the way it is”.

Despite the criticism it has received, I will therefore use the term “Sixth Generation” in this paper to refer loosely to the group of filmmakers putting out work after 1989 that has been at least partially created outside the state film studios and which is committedly independent in spirit.

As mentioned above, the term “Sixth Generation” was used to set the films of these directors apart from the work of their Fifth Generation predecessors. This resolve was strengthened during the 1990s, which saw several Fifth Generation filmmakers reverted to more traditional genres and styles such as tearjerker melodramas and

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24 Reynaud, Berenice, “Modern Times: As the Chinese Film Industry Opens Up, a New Wave of Chinese Filmmakers Is Reaping the Benefits of the Sixth Generation’s years of Struggle,” *Film Comment* (September-October 2003): 56, 60.
25 Cui, 99.
spectacular historical epics. Zhang Yimou’s *Not One Less* (1999), for example, his first film heartily endorsed by authorities, featured a faster-paced, more commercial style and upbeat ending. It provoked accusation by judges at the Cannes Film Festival that the film was “propaganda for the Chinese government”. *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004) have also marked his entrance into the realm of swordplay spectacle.

Indeed, Rayns argues that the Fifth Generation films had fulfilled their artistic, rebellious ambitions within three years of their first appearance, arguing that after Chen Kaige completed *King of the Children* (Haizi Wang) in 1987, Fifth Generation cinema ended. He notes that films like *The Blue Kite* and Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* (*Ba Wang Bie Ji, 1993*) produced in the early 1990s were stragglers, footnotes to the main Fifth Generation project. Professor Ni also refers to the period from 1983 to 1989 as the Fifth Generation’s “initial creative period,” the one “that defines the Fifth Generation films as an art movement”. Jia Zhangke echoes the sentiments of many of his fellow Sixth Generation filmmakers when he says that his work is a rejection of what he felt was the Fifth Generation's increasing tendency to move “away from the reality of modern China and into the realm of historical legend”.

The circumstances of the Sixth Generation’s emergence, however, bear a number of similarities with their Fifth Generation predecessors. Many members of the Sixth Generation were also made up of young filmmakers; most were in their twenties when they began making films, and some of the most prominent similarly graduated from the

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27 Zhang Yingjin, 53.
29 Rayns, 3.
30 Ni, 93.
Beijing Film Academy. Zhang Yuan, for instance, one of the leaders of the movement, graduated from the Academy in 1989 with a BA in Film. His debut *Mama* (1991), however, in addition to his next feature *Beijing Bastards* (1993), were both made with small budgets funded entirely by private sources within China (the second being largely financed by its star, musician Cui Jian).\(^{32}\) This is because unlike young Fifth Generation filmmakers, for whom a unique set of circumstances let them bypass the studio seniority system and immediately begin making films in state-run studios, young talent emerging in the early 1990s had no means of bypassing this rank system. The 1993 Reforms also sent the remaining state industry into debt and near-paralysis, making it even harder to enter as a new filmmaker.\(^{33}\) Also a Beijing Film Academy graduate, Jia Zhangke cites foreign films seen at the Academy as a hugely influential factor, much as it was for Fifth Generation students like Zhang, Chen, and Tian.\(^{34}\)

As cited above, directors of the new generation seek all possible means to survive and succeed, making films both inside and outside the system. While it seems, therefore, that many young directors commit themselves to creating “independent cinema” only as matter of necessity – raising money through private investors, shooting using real locations, smuggling negatives out of the country, and having postproduction done without the director in countries such as Holland and Australia, such as was done with *Mama* in addition to Wang Xiaoshuai’s *The Days* (1993), and *Red Beads* (1993) - there was also a very real committedly independent spirit in the work of most of these early directors. Many of them would not have made their films inside what is left of the state

\(^{32}\) Sheila Cornelius, 110-112.  
\(^{33}\) Rayns, 2.  
\(^{34}\) Berry, 64.
film industry, even if they had been given the chance to do so.\textsuperscript{35} Because of this, Zhang Yuan, for example, has said that he, like many other member of his generation, prefers the term “independent filmmaker”.\textsuperscript{36} Further, as mentioned above, the shadow of censorship still lingers over many of these films: a common trait of Sixth Generation films is that many of them fail to gain approval from the Radio, Film and Television Bureau (Guang Dian Ju). Zhang Yuan’s first two projects, for example, were banned, as were works from directors including Wang and He Jianjun. Out of Jia’s three films that I analyze in this paper, none were legally screened in China.\textsuperscript{37}

Interestingly, it is this “banned” status in China that often helps with notoriety and fame abroad, attracting both international interest and capital. The idea, too, of an “underground” movement which is part of a larger, anti-authoritarian “subculture” appeals to many Westerners, in part due to a tradition of anti-communist sentiments and of championing individuality.\textsuperscript{38}

Sixth Generation directors also say that they value the Western notion of individualism: being able to tell one’s own story from one’s own perspective, free of institutional regulations and ideological manipulations.\textsuperscript{39} The way they accomplished this in their work and their modes of film exploration and experimentation, however, could not be more different from the approach of the early Fifth Generation artists. That is not to say their work is dichotomous: unlike Fifth Generation films, it is not as easy to summarize the concerns of the Sixth Generation directors of the last two decades. Despite

\textsuperscript{35} Reynaud, 56.
\textsuperscript{37} Sheila Cornelius, 111.
\textsuperscript{38} Cui, 102-103.
\textsuperscript{39} Cui, 98-99.
their lack of money and resources, the range of their work has been spectacular: Sixth Generation films have explored modernist ideas of storytelling, including improvisation, lacunary narratives, and the use of non-professional actors. They have focused on previously “invisible” minority groups within Chinese society such as gay men and women. Perhaps most importantly, they claim to have eliminated any “exotic orientalism” in their work, a trait which many of the Fifth Generation historical art films were criticized for.\(^{40}\) New generation filmmakers are contrarily free of the notion that a film needs a “grand symbolic dimension” to prevail as a work of art.

One specific characteristic of Sixth Generation films is their realist depiction of sexuality. In Fifth Generation films, sexuality was often used as an allegory, highlighting the woman as a visual image and discursive element to convey the meaning of nation and history.\(^{41}\) According to Cui, for example, Zhang Yimou’s films feature the close-up view of the female figure which magnifies, on the one hand, her role in the narration of socio-historical traumas, and, on the other hand, offers her exotic image for fantasies of international audience. By contrast, in Sixth Generation director Li Yu’s *Fish and Elephant* (Jin Nian Xia Tian, 2001), the camera uses an open, unrestrained representation of sexuality, in this case to depict a homosexual couple. Due to both other films’ unrestrained representation of heterosexuality and Yu’s counter-exposure of homosexuality, the film is able to bring this rhetoric onto center stage and again undergo inscription.\(^{42}\)

\(^{40}\) Rayns, 3. 
\(^{42}\) Cui, 106.
Another characteristic of many Sixth Generation films is the use of urban milieu. The common preference for location shooting and collective mise-en-scène runs antithetically to that of their predecessors—the masters of the Fifth Generation who have defined their cinema in predominantly rural scenarios and locales. This environmental categorization was also significant enough for Zhang Zhen to propose the term “urban generation;” in the introduction to a compilation of essays focusing on this theme, Zhang points to “the ubiquity of the bulldozer, the building crane, and the debris of urban ruins,” as key in the shared visual register of this movement. Urban settings, however, are not new to Chinese audiences. Productions in the 1930s and 1940s, such as *Malu Tianshi* (Street Angel, 1937) and *Yijiang Chunshui Xiang Dongliu* (Spring River Flows East, 1947) used urban space as a cinematic site to explore national turmoil, urban-rural differences, and family melodramas. Unlike their predecessors, however, young Sixth Generation directors use these urban spaces to depict personal, individual stories of common people who often view an isolated apartment as a private world and urban life as a form of youthful self-display. Wang’s *So Close to Paradise* (Biandan Guniang, 1998), for example, focuses on the rehabilitation of a singer/prostitute and her interactions with a migrant worker living in the city slums.

Another commonality of Sixth Generation films is their focus on marginalized peoples: migrant workers, artists, rural workers, young people, and the depiction of their personal lives. Indeed, the urban milieu is often used to explore the lives of these people who live at the fringes of mainstream societies, often in city slums. Scholar Cui Shuqin

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44 Cui, 99.
45 Sheila Cornelius, 110.
further asserts that the portrayal of marginalized groups onscreen show a self-conscious desire to install the artists in the film. Cui gives the example of Wang Xiaoshuai’s *The Days* (Dongchun de Rizi, 1994), in which two avant-garde painters from real life play two artists whose relationship slowly deteriorates onscreen. She also uses the example of Wang’s *Frozen* (Jidu Hanleng 1999), which follows how an artist seeks the meaning of life by performing death and turns his own suicide into his last work of art. Cui argues that because filmmakers like Wang face a “marginalized status in society” with their onscreen protagonists, the characters are a direct reflection of their own wish to emerge from this lower social level.\(^{46}\) While this could be true in a strictly literal sense, and the work of filmmakers naturally reflects the values and ideology held by both themselves and by people around them, I believe the choice to depict marginalized groups stems more from a desire by filmmakers to give a voice to these individuals, who are largely ignored both in society and in film.

Another distinct feature of Sixth Generation work is the prominence of documentary films or fiction films with a “documentary impulse”.\(^{47}\) As Jia often argues, China has no sustained documentary tradition apart from the state-sponsored propaganda films and technical or educational films. His contention is that although China is undergoing tremendous change, contemporary Chinese movies seem to avoid grappling with “the here and now” (dangxia).\(^{48}\) “There is a responsibility to film [the present],” he says, “so that in the future we will be able to see how it really was”.\(^{49}\) His hometown

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\(^{46}\) Cui, 100-101.


\(^{48}\) Berry, 63.

trilogy—*Xiao Wu* (1997), *Platform* (Zhantai, 2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (Ren Xiaoyao, 2002)—offered Chinese cinema a documentary-based representation of contemporary underclass, particularly those people living in small cities who are marginalized by sweeping societal developments.

One of the distinctive characteristics that sets Jia and his contemporaries apart from their predecessors is the visual aesthetic of their work, particularly this “documentary impulse.” Classical theorists like André Bazin claimed that cinema is capable of delivering objective truths via aesthetic means, a stylistic ideal commonly referred to as “cinema verité,” reproducing reality that would be no different from what the audience sees in real life.50 While subsequent developments in poststructuralist theory and newer, more radical emphases on subjectivity complicated existing relations between cinema and their purported truths, the term “cinema verité” is still used by many scholars and critics today to describe film aesthetic. In early Sixth Generation features such as *Mama*, *Red Beads*, and *The Days*, the use of Black-and-white frames, simultaneous sound tracks, shabby settings contributed to what critics often call a “gritty” look and feel.51 Jia’s films in particular are widely celebrated for their “authentic” value and for conveying the aesthetic of cinema verité; they use characteristic elements such as handheld camera and long shots combined with long takes. His choice to use non-professional actors also contributes to a realistic, documentary feel.52

His debut feature *Xiao Wu* (1997), a film which enjoys the widest underground distribution on pirated, shop-burned VCDs, is considered the inspiration for the dominant

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trend in Sixth Generation filmmaking since 1997, a second group of Sixth Generation filmmakers following Zhang Yuan and Wang Xiaoshuai dubbed the “second wave”. The most prominent of this second wave is unquestionably Jia Zhangke, but a number of others are following in his wake: Li Yu, Liu Bingjian (*Men Men Women Women*, 1999; *Cry Woman*, 2002), Wang Quan’an (*Lunar Eclipse*, 1999; *The Story of Guan Er Mei*, 2003), Wang Chao (*The Orphan of Anyang*, 2001), Emily Tang (*Conjugation* 2001), and Zhu Wen (*Seafood* 2001).

Jia's interest in film began in the early 1990s, as an art student at the Shanxi University in Taiyuan. While there, he attended a screening of Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth*. The film, according to Jia, was life changing, and convinced the young man that he wanted to be a director. He would eventually enter the Beijing Film Academy in 1993 as a film theory major, giving him access to both western and eastern classics included in the Academy’s extensive film library. At age 27, he hit the international film scene with *Xiao Wu*, whose international success enabled Jia to finance a follow-up, the three-hour *Platform*, which firmly established his reputation as the most exciting filmmaker to emerge from China in recent years. After his next film, the 2002 *Unknown Pleasures*, he secured multiple producers and a large budget to film his 2004 film *The World*, which takes place in a theme park outside Beijing, filled with replicas of famous international sights. In 2006 Jia made his most famous film to date, *Still Life* (*Sanxia Haoren*), which follows the parallel stories of two immigrants in Fengjie, one of the numerous cities to be completely submerged by the Three Gorges Dam. The film won the Golden Lion at the 2006 Venice Film Festival.

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53 Reynaud, 60.
54 Berry, 64.
His first three films which I focus on in this paper, however, are all, like Xiao Wu, set in his native province of Shanxi. Xiao Wu itself prominently establishes the film style attributed to Jia: a kind of minimalist cinema verité style, using wide-angle compositions, extended takes and low-key, and undemonstrative performances. Its focus is a hallmark of the types of characters and situations Jia’s films depict: a young pickpocket tries to discover his own sexuality and identity, facing humiliation, loss, and ultimate alienation from society.

Spanning ten years in the life of a Shanxi-based song-and-dance troupe, Platform follows the lives of two young male performers and their romantic others as the troupe introduces new Western elements into its performances and eventually becomes privatized. The film, a story about change, time, and coming of age, stood out for its distinct naturalistic style and, again, for its frank depiction of a seldom-seen side of China. It makes extensive use of wide-angle compositions, extended takes, and low-key undemonstrative performances.

Jia's third feature, Unknown Pleasures, continues his meditation on a country and society in transition. Set in the gray provincial city of Datong, the film portrays two young male delinquents living on a diet of Chinese pop music, karaoke, and Coca-Cola while entertaining dreams of joining the army or becoming small-time gangsters. Again, Jia focuses on the coming-of-age process for a pair of young protagonists whom are trying to form both relationships and their own identities within a culture radically changed by economic reform and the influence of global popular culture.

This focus on lives of young people, in particular the construction of the coming-of-age narrative, therefore plays a prominent role in all three of his first three features.
This is a theme which appeared in the work of earlier Sixth Generation filmmakers: it is the focus of such films as Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Shanghai Dreams* (Qinghong, 2005) and *Beijing Bicycle* (Shiqi Sui de Danche, 2001). However, combined with his emphasis on cinema verité, trademark long takes, and the subtle powers of observation, Jia Zhangke uses this theme to create a new trajectory for Chinese cinema.

I would like to use his first three films to analyze how the visual style of his films, which is based around a minimalist cinema verité style, influences his work’s reflection on how a new social order of young people negotiate their own Bildungsromans while surrounded by the disassembly and destabilization of relationships, moral codes, and ways of life created by the influx of consumerism and Western popular culture. At the heart of this essay lies an exploration into the historical contexts of his films, the literary and cinematic intertexts with which they form dialogue, the thematic and philosophical hubs around which his filmic universe revolves, and the visual language that makes Jia’s work so strikingly unique.

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55 Sheila Cornelius, 109.
Chapter 2 - Bildungsroman: History and Application of the genre

The Bildungsroman, which is also referred to as the “coming-of-age” or “self-development” narrative, or the “narrative of formation,” refers to a specific genre principally concerned with the spiritual and psychological development of the protagonist. The genre has its origins in late eighteenth century Germany, and was embraced by German writers after the appearance in 1795 of Johann Wolfgang Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre (Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship)*. Goethe’s story focuses on his protagonist’s attempt to escape what he views as the empty life of a bourgeois businessman who, after a failed attempt at theater, commits himself to a mysterious society comprised of enlightened aristocrats who will guide him towards his true calling.

The term, however, was not invented by Goethe; it originally derived from the religious beliefs of Pietism popular in eighteenth-century Germany and the emergence of the new *Empfundsamkeit* (sensibility) of the period. *Roman* means “novel,” while *Bildung* has several related meanings in German, the most important being a formation or developmental process and, more specifically, the spiritual and psychological formation or development of a young man.

The term was popularized by its use by the Germanist Wilhelm Dilthey in his analysis of literature *Das Leben Schleiermachers* published in 1870. He designated as Bildungsroman those novels that make up the “Wilhelm Meister school.” Dilthey used

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Goethe’s novel to define the Bildungsroman genre as he saw it, explaining that it is used because the novel depicts the history of “a young man who enters into life in a blissful state of ignorance, seeks related souls, experiences friendship and love, struggles with the hard realities of the world and thus armed with a variety of experiences, matures, finds himself and his mission in the world”.\textsuperscript{59} Dilthey’s is the most frequently cited traditional definition of the genre. He notes that reflectiveness, preoccupation with matters of the development of mind and soul, is another key element of the Bildungsroman.

The Bildungsroman has been considered a primarily German genre due to its origins and the fact that, as argued by Dilthey, it expresses the individualism and interest in self-cultivation that is specifically valued by German culture. Writers around 1910 such as Thomas Mann and Hermann Hesse also took up the Bildungsroman, defining it as a type of novel that is “typically German” and “legitimately national in character.”\textsuperscript{60} Although James Hardin further describes the Bildungsroman as “the most important subgenre of the novel in Germany,” and goes on to argue that well into the twentieth century the greatest German novels are Bildungsromane,\textsuperscript{61} Marianne Hirsch and Professor Michael Minden both argue that the Bildungsroman is a European, not purely German genre. Minden defines the genre as rather a German contribution, and the most famous one at that, to the European novel.\textsuperscript{62}

Despite its strong heritage based in German and European literature, the term has since then been applied by critics to several different mediums and settings which expand upon the original narrow definition. Feminist criticism, for example, took up the

\textsuperscript{59} Hardin, xiii-xiv.
\textsuperscript{60} Kontje, 35-37.
\textsuperscript{61} Hardin, i.
Bildungsroman enthusiastically beginning in the 1970s; Barbara Ann White in 1985 called it “the most popular form of feminist fiction.”63 While many female scholars admit that the genre in its traditional usage was defined in sexist terms, they admit that if properly defined, it can be uniquely descriptive of the awakening experience of female protagonists. Most therefore used a broader definition, referring simply to novels which follow the protagonist from inexperience to knowledge.

The application of the Bildungsroman motif can be applied not only across gender lines, but also across cultures. Alicia Otano uses the narrative of “self-development” as a genre to analyze literature focusing on Asian American stories written from children’s perspectives. She argues the combination of child’s perspective and the Bildungsroman motif is particularly useful in understanding how young Asian Americans between cultures negotiate their integration into a specific culture’s society.64

The motif has also spread to entirely different mediums, demonstrated by its appearance, for instance, in film analysis. In his analysis of the noir film *The Big Night* (1951), Tony Williams examines the story of young boy who undergoes his own Bildungsroman in a society marked by vice, corruption, violence, and other characteristic dark aspects of the noir setting.65 While the context is a variation of the traditional pre-industrial European setting, the protagonist still experiences a conventional Bildungsroman, becoming at the end of the film a fully mature youth and gaining an

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understanding of the adult world—including his own social position, the dilemmas affecting his revered father, and the grim realities of urban life.\(^{66}\)

Clara Law also pulls the genre into her understanding of the Hong Kong film *Three Summers* (1992). She examines the “coming of age” or Bildungsroman motif reflected through the development of the main protagonist, a young girl, over the course of three summers. The girl, after spending the majority of the film on a resort island exploring romantic relationships and exposed to the harsher realities of the lives of her older friends, “comes of age,” both losing her innocence and joining the world of modern adults, busy with the often superficial cares of city life.\(^{67}\)

Although, as James Hardin argues, there is no precise consensus on the meaning of the term Bildungsroman, many critics have laid out basic guidelines as to how it can be defined as a genre in its application to twentieth century and contemporary narratives. According to Thomas Jeffers, the protagonist is often a sensitive child, whose lively imagination is frustrated by his neighbors’ and family’s social prejudices and intellectual obtuseness.\(^{68}\) He also notes a common autobiographical nature, with narratives which often feature things that have happened to the author or to which the author feels close.\(^{69}\) Jeffers also notes that the protagonists either don’t have fathers alive or they have fathers who are tyrannical or feckless, citing examples of English and American Bildungsromans such as that of David Copperfield, Oliver Alden, and Ernest Pontifex.\(^{70}\)

\(^{66}\) Williams, 97.
\(^{68}\) Jeffers, Thomas L. *The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 52.
\(^{69}\) Jeffers, 192.
\(^{70}\) Jeffers, 188.
In the collection of essays on the Bildungsroman edited by Hardin, most contributors propose limiting the definition to novels explicitly based on Goethe’s novel, which most importantly expresses a positive belief in the benefits of cultural assimilation. This accommodation between the individual and society shows up in most definitions as an essential characteristic of the genre.\(^\text{71}\)

This interpretation, for example, was used by scholar Roy Pascal. In his 1956 analysis *The German Novel*, Pascal sets out to introduce English-speaking readers to the tradition of the German Bildungsroman, which he views as “the story of the formation of a character up to the moment when he ceases to be self-centered and becomes society-centered, thus beginning to shape his true self”.\(^\text{72}\) Thomas Jeffers goes so far as to describe the Bildungsroman as patriotic—a celebration of a political and social system that promotes the well-being of the individuated many as against the individuated (and isolated) few.\(^\text{73}\)

Jeffers also focuses on the importance of the *Bildung* and the function of the Bildungsroman narrative as a process. He relates it back to man’s biological origins, stating that “the ability to recognize a story of *Bildung* depends on the psychic round the ego must pass through, analogous to the biological round the body must pass through”.\(^\text{74}\) Marianne Hirsch notes that the term *Bildung* is both active and passive, suggesting both the process of education that is depicted in these novels and the product that takes shape (or form) as it grows out of itself and in response to external factors.\(^\text{75}\)

\(^{71}\) Hardin, xxi.


\(^{73}\) Jeffers, 52-53.

\(^{74}\) Jeffers, 54.

Overall, Hirsch defines a Bildungsroman narrative or narrative of “self-development” through the use of a specific set of criteria. She cites a plot which deals with an essentially passive protagonist, is centered around the search for a meaning to life, develops in a gradual and chronological manner, and ends with the protagonist’s willing entry into the surrounding society.  

I feel the concept as interpreted by Hirsch’s broader set of criteria, along with the general traits listed by Jeffers, would be most useful applied to Jia’s early work, which is why I focus in on these particular themes when looking at the films.  

When looking at Hirsch’s criteria, however, it is important to note that elaborating on the “meaning for life” searched for by the protagonist, Hirsch explains that the projected resolution to this search is “an accommodation to the existing society.” This characteristic is one of the most commonly cited, and is reaffirmed by previous critics’ analyses: while differing in levels of broadness, they all specify that the Bildungsroman narrative, with its teleological philosophical underpinning, must lead to the protagonist’s cultural and social assimilation, with most reaffirming the inherent benefits of this assimilation.  

I intend to employ the Bildungsroman motif in my analysis of Jia’s films and argue that while Jia’s films accommodate the conventional, accepted Bildungsroman genre conventions specified by Hirsch, it is this final successful integration into China’s contemporary social culture which they consistently and overtly contradicts. It is through this contradiction that he is able to reflect his own messages about post-modern Chinese culture: his young protagonists’ failure to complete a successful Bildungsroman

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76 Hirsch, 296-298.
illustrates the damage to inter-personal relationships, value systems, and communication caused by the country’s rapid social and economic development.

His protagonists’ coming of age processes are also distinct due to their placement within a Chinese setting, which tends to value the importance of society over the individual. In my paper, I will argue that Jia supports this trait using film conventions which overtly deny the viewer access to character subjectivity, including long shots and long takes, deep focus, and mise-en-scène framing devices and character placement. By downplaying the individualism which is a characteristic of many Western narratives, Jia’s coloring of the genre therefore plays with the pull between individualism and Chinese traditional social relations, which further reflects the conflict between generations and between Western ideas and Chinese traditional culture playing out in Chinese society today. It is Jia’s application and manipulation of genre style and characteristics within this cultural context which will enable us not only to better understand youth in contemporary China today, but also better develop and expand our understanding of the Bildungsroman as a genre.
Chapter 3 - Jia Begins at Home: Alienation and a Shift of Values for Youth in *Xiao Wu*

The first film I will consider is Jia’s first feature-length, *Xiao Wu*. Filmed in 1997 on 16mm film and a shoestring budget of 280,000 RMB, and shot in Shanxi province in Jia’s hometown of Fenyang, the film follows the journey of a pocket thief, Xiao Wu. He returns home to discover that the landscape is rapidly changing and many of the town’s old buildings are being torn down and due to economic development. He also discovers that his old friends have moved on from theft to entrepreneurship, going abroad, marrying, and leading successful lives. He also learns that one of these friends, Xiao Yong, has not invited Xiao Wu to his wedding for fear people might remember that he too used to be a pickpocket. Xiao Wu spends his idle time at a Karaoke bar (KTV), where he falls in love with a girl who works there, Mei Mei. She suggests he get a beeper so she can let him know when she is free, but soon after Xiao Wu learns that Mei Mei has left town with some rich clients, failing to tell him where she has gone. The beeper ultimately causes him to get caught while stealing and subsequently be arrested.

Section 1 – The Bildungsroman in Contention, Community Versus the Individual

This story adheres to many of the conventional characteristics of the Bildungsroman genre mentioned in the previous section. First and foremost, Xiao Wu is an essentially passive protagonist, a single young man whose story develops in a gradual and chronological manner. The film opens with a scene of a young boy waiting by the side of the road for a bus, with a factory smokestack in the distance surrounded by fields. Xiaoping Lin argues that this opening scene “link[s] the youthful protagonist with

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China’s socialist past” and serves as a distant reminder of the industrial agricultural past from which Xiao Wu (and China) is emerging.  

While this boy is not explicitly labeled as Xiao Wu in his early years, the scene immediately cuts to a shot of Xiao Wu as a young man, standing in the exact same place on the roadside, therefore leading the audience to conclude that this is the same individual. This cut, which symbolizes this transition from youth to adulthood, foreshadows the rest of the story’s arc, which focuses on the development, education, and maturing of its protagonist, Xiao Wu, which is partly emblematic of the transition of Chinese society itself that concurrently takes place. As part of most conventional coming of age stories, Xiao Wu also develops a love interest, the KTV girl Mei Mei. Adhering to the archetypal Bildungsroman plot described by Thomas Jeffers, this relationships helps Xiao Wu “revalue his values,” making him realize that his own principles and ideals are out of synch with those of Mei Mei and of the rest of China’s new social order.

The western Bildungsroman narrative, however, normally traces this development by providing the audience access to its protagonist’s psychology. Narratives most commonly do this through first person narration, which reveal the protagonist’s inner emotions, reasoning, and reactions to external events. Stories such as Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, although told by an outside narrator, use omniscient third-person narration, which provides a similar insight into the psychology and thoughts of the

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protagonist. Film can convey this same depth of knowledge through the use of optical point-of-view shots, voice-over narration, or depicting flashbacks or other subjective images, fantasies, or hallucinations seen by the characters themselves. Jia almost never employs these techniques, however, instead providing a narrative which is told through a series of long shots and medium long shots, often paired with long takes and little movement.

According to scholar Tonglin Lu, this use of long shots represents Jia’s strive for realism and his rejection of cinematic illusion created through “jaded” filmic conventions (such as close-ups and faster editing). He has acknowledged several key influences on his aesthetic, citing a mixture of stylists such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Vittorio De Sica, from whom he draws a common grammar of long contemplative takes and frame compositions that feature deep focus. By using these techniques to restrict narration, Jia therefore diverges from the typical Bildungsroman story form, deliberately preventing the audience access to Xiao Wu’s inner psychology.

As noted in the last section, the original German use of the genre focuses on themes of individualism and interest in self-cultivation. Indeed, Dilthey argues that it is precisely this focus on individualism that makes the genre distinctly German or western European in nature. Transferring this genre to an Asian setting, Jia reverts its role, turning his focus to the community and depicting individualism as a concept in direct conflict with Chinese social structures. According to Jia, “Chinese people live in a world where

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they are dependent on interpersonal relationships…[and are] always living in the context and confines of these relationships”.

This is a key difference between Chinese and Western cultures; social relationships are viewed as the most important part of an individual’s life and development, which is why Jia makes them the central part of a Chinese Bildungsroman. While Western scholars most often associate the strong emphasis on community with Chinese communism, it can be traced to roots in the Confucian family and kinship constructions of persons in the Qing period. Tani Barlow explains that during the Qing Dynasty, “Confucian subjects always appeared as part of something else, defined not by essence but by context, marked by interdependency and reciprocal obligation rather than by autonomy and contradiction”. This demonstrates not only the importance placed on the values of the group over that of the individual, but the discouragement of dissent in traditional Chinese society. Wu Dingbo further explains that while Westerners have been individualized thanks to their abstract philosophy of life, the Chinese have not been individualized due to their concrete philosophy of life.

One of Jia’s primary arguments is that the tension between Western influences such as the concept of individualism with Chinese traditional society and family-oriented values has caused a devastating effect on youth in post-modern China today. This is why his comparison with the Western coming of age narrative is particularly fruitful. By

85 Jia, 193.
89 Jia Zhangke, interview with Michael Berry, Speaking in Images (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 191.
observing not only Jia’s adherence to conventions, but also his selective divergence, we are able to observe how he uses this form in new ways and adapts it to a contemporary Chinese setting, allowing us see both the characters in his work and in the work of other auteurs in an interesting new light.

Section 2 – Visual Style

The techniques and filming style Jia employs highlight relationships and the community by drawing attention to Xiao Wu’s environment and the people around him. Instead of using medium close-up and close-up shots of his protagonist, which often aid in aligning the viewer directly with this character’s emotional state and point of view, Jia almost exclusively uses medium long shots and long shots, which means the frame always includes not only the protagonist but also the people he is interacting with. The viewer is therefore always conscious of the people surrounding Xiao Wu and his relationships with them. Jia also uses techniques such as frame within a frame, staging, lighting, and color in order to draw audience attention to these relationships within the mise-en-scene. Because he rarely uses rapid editing or cut-ins, which are traditional ways to highlight actions important to narrative development, these techniques also serve to simply aid the viewer in following the plot.

The scene set in Xiao Wu’s house depicting his interaction with family members provides an excellent example of these techniques. The scene begins with a medium long shot of his father sitting on the bed, smoking. One of Xiao Wu’s brothers enters the shot and sits in front of a large window. Jia shoots directly into the natural light, hiding his

90 Bordwell, 178-179.
91 Bordwell, 181-182.
actors' faces in the shadows cast by strong backlighting.\textsuperscript{92} This obscures the details of the son’s face, avoiding drawing attention to the son’s reactions and facial expressions.

According to scholar Kent Jones, this is a set composition that Jia and his cinematographer Yu Lik-wai employ countless variations on: two or three people sitting or standing in a tight space, with an open window or doorway off to the side, and a light source that “glows bewitchingly through Yu’s filters”.\textsuperscript{93} The edge of the window is also located directly between the two characters, creating a contrast of light and dark between the two, drawing attention towards the interaction between the two. Three more family members and the brother’s fiancé then enter the frame; they all sit symmetrically in a half circle around the table in the center of the bed, creating a balanced shot. Because of this balance, and because all wear similar earth tones and received similar backlighting from the motivated window light, the viewer’s attention is not drawn to any one character within the shot, instead focusing on the harmony and interaction between the family members as a unit. When Xiao Wu enters the shot, he sits on the edge of the bed to the left of the father, with his body facing out towards the camera instead of inwards towards the other characters. He is the only character not obscured by the light from the window, and his facial expressions are also more visible because he is closer to the camera. This staging and lighting creates a visual contrast, differentiating him from the rest of the characters in the scene.

This shot lasts more than three minutes. Jia finally cuts to another medium long shot, in which only Xiao Wu and the fiancé are visible through a doorway. The fiancé has

\textsuperscript{92} Hughes, Darren. [blog post] (March 24, 2008) <http://www.longpauses.com/blog/2008/03/platform-2000.html>

\textsuperscript{93} Jones, Kent. “Unknown Pleasures, A Hunting Study of Dead-End Youth in a Rapidly Changing World, Confirms China’s Jia Zhangke as a Master of Modern Alienation” Film Comment 38, no. 5 (2002), 45.
her back turned towards the camera, and Xiao Wu’s body is in the center of the shot, framed by the doorway. Jia uses these visual cues to draw the viewer’s attention to Xiao Wu’s body language, which conveys important narrative information: Xiao Wu stares at the fiancé’s hand for several seconds, and continues staring as he gets up and walks towards the camera to exit the frame. This leads to the next shot, in which he confronts the mother, asking if the fiancé’s ring (which the fiancé was wearing on her hand) is the same one he gave to his mother. This third shot again frames Xiao Wu and the mother within a doorway. A hanging sheet in the background whose edge falls between the two characters again provides a contrasting background, drawing attention towards their interaction. Xiao Wu’s sister, previously obscured from the camera, steps between the two to calm them down. Her bright red sweater stands out in contrast with Xiao Wu and his mother’s dark blue clothing, visually underscoring the conflict and divide between Jia and his mother. When his father throws him out of the house at the end of the scene due to his anger at his mother for giving away the ring, it again illustrates the generational divide which Jia has used simple film techniques to highlight throughout the scene.

Section 3 – Relationships with Others and with the Community as a Whole

In an interview about his filmmaking, Jia says that of all the radical changes confronting the Chinese people in recent years, he feels that the "most fundamental and devastating change" is that of interpersonal relationships. He goes on to explain that in Fenyang, for example, the rate of modernization and economic growth and the impact that the forces of commodification had on people was directly related to this radical transformation of interpersonal relationships and friendships.94 The development of Xiao

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94 Jia, 194.
Wu’s relationships with his family and friends illustrate this devastating change. Jia not only focuses on the negative way relationships have changed within China, but he also highlights and critiques the forces that have caused it.

After Deng Xiaoping’s program of economic reforms begun in 1978, China transformed over two decades from an isolated socialist country to an emerging global power. In the process, globalization has imposed on a new generation of Chinese people born in the 1980s and 1990s a radical break between them and their parents’ generation in terms of working environment, lifestyle, and value system. This rapid modernization and shift in values completely altered the previous cultural basis for the formation of a stable community in contemporary China. A new generation of young individuals coming of age, because of the influence forces of rapid modernization and commodification have had on interpersonal relationships, make up a new social order which values money and material wealth over everything else, and they must shape their relationships with this new goal in mind in order to succeed. Journalist and scholar Richard James Havis elaborates on this, explaining that the reforms started by Deng Xiaoping have begun to destroy Chinese culture by breeding a money-obsessed society, which “imports fashions wholesale” from the outside.

Jia focuses on the transformation of Xiao Wu’s relationships with friends and family in order to illustrate the consequences of this new social order and the outcome for those who fail to conform and therefore fail to successfully assimilate into modern society. He focuses specifically on Xiao Wu’s relationship with his friend Xiao Yong, his

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95 Lu, 125.
Jia’s depiction of the relationship between Xiao Wu and his family members illustrates his role as part of a younger generation which, because of their lifestyles and reliance on pop culture, are removed from the values and traditions of their parents’ older generation. Xiao Wu’s father is a farmer and spends most of his time sitting in their simple dirt-floor house listening to Chinese radio dramas. While he talks with the other family members about crop rotations and field conditions, the separation Jia’s staging and lighting creates within the scene between Xiao Wu and the rest of the family represents the change that has happened within modern Chinese family relationships: Xiao Wu’s psychological distance and divergence from his parents’ concerns, interests, and way of thinking.

Another relationship Jia highlights in the film is that of Xiao Wu and his old friend, Xiao Yong. The interactions which the two have after Xiao Wu returns to his town again represents the “devastating change” to interpersonal relationships that Jia describes taking place throughout China. Xiao Yong forsakes Jia because of his low status in society; he is willing to completely destroy their long-term friendship simply in order to destroy a possible link made between him and Xiao Wu’s profession, that of a thief: Xiao Wang has become a successful member of the community because he values future business connections and standing in the community over interpersonal relationships, and Jia consistently juxtaposes Xiao Wu’s low status in society to his former friends’ new-found success. Xiao Wu is devastated because he views this friendship in the light of the traditional, relationship-oriented values of a pre-modern
China; Xiao Yong’s broken promises and lack of trust represent the impact of modern social forces on the way young people view friendships.

Indeed, Xiao Yong fully represents the influence of China’s new commodity oriented culture - he has taken full advantage of China’s new capitalist society, becoming a successful entrepreneur selling imported cigarettes and running a bar. His success also demonstrates his ability to adapt his own values to the changing culture. When he opens a dance hall, which is actually a place for prostitution, he calls it “being in the entertainment industry,” while he describes his import of contraband cigarettes as “being in the trade industry”. His ability to use word games to avoid any moral burden or responsibility is in stark contrast to Xiao Wu, who is unable to cover up his role as a thief with language, therefore unable to enter a society which has become structured around word manipulation and saving face rather than moral responsibility. 97

The next relationship Jia focuses on is that of Xiao Wu and his love interest, Mei Mei. This relationship also does not end successfully, but is instead abruptly and coldly cut off. According to Jia, in contrast to the past, in which the Chinese view of love was always an eternal one, the relationship between Xiao Wu and Mei Mei represents the change modern social forces have had on romantic relationships, which have become “only about the moment, the now”. 98

97 Jia, 194.
98 Jia, 193.
It is because of this crutch that their relationship cannot be deep or lasting - much like the shabby walls that are exposed when Jia visits the KTV during the daytime, Mei Mei’s unannounced departure, caused by the prospects offered by some wealthy guests, exposes their relationship as shallow and ephemeral. As Cui Shuqin notes, Xiao Wu and Mei Mei “Sense themselves falling in love, but they fail to realize that their relationship is grounded on a commercial transaction”.99 Furthermore, the beeper that he has purchased for Mei Mei to contact him not only fails to bring him closer to his lover, but it becomes the direct impetus to his arrest, going off as he is lifting a wallet. The connection between material exchange and Xiao Wu’s downfall can easily be read as a critique of capitalism and the rapid drive towards materialism gripping China in the late 1990s.

Xiao Wu’s immense devastation over the departure of Mei Mei further illustrates his inability to assimilate into modern society, which, like Mei Mei, places economic values above love or lasting personal relationships. The gold ring that he buys for Mei Mei, for instance, symbolizes his deep feelings for her. After Mei Mei leaves, however, he gives the ring to his mother, who then gives the ring to Xiao Wu’s brother so he can use it as a present for his wealthy fiancée. While this angers Xiao Wu, his mother and the rest of his family all see no problem in the use of the ring to make the family appear more

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99 Cui, Shuqin, "Negotiating In-Between: On New-Generation Filmmaking and Jia Zhangke's Films," *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 18, no. 2 (Fall 2006), 110.
wealthy, therefore raising their status within the community. To them, the ring only has monetary value. This reflects the influence of global capitalism, specifically the idea of equating wealth with success and happiness. This view shared by both Xiao Wu’s family and the community, however, is in contrast with Xiao Wu’s own views. He attaches personal emotions to the ring, and sees the attached personal relationship as the most important aspect of the ring, not its monetary value.

Xiao Wu’s actions also illustrate the contrast between Xiao Wu’s personal values and the radically altered value system of the society which ostracizes him. When Xiao Wu finds out all the trouble a lost ID card has brought a friend, for instance, he begins sending in to the police station the ID cards from people’s wallets he has stolen. This anonymous act of goodwill is in stark contrast to Xiao Yong’s donation to a local charity, which he makes sure to well-publicize on television. While Xiao Yong’s donation is made in order to keep up appearances within society, Xiao Wu’s act is based on a personal system of moral value. Xiao Yong’s behavior, however, represents the beliefs, practices, and motives of this modern society. Indeed, Jia in a 2005 interview stated that Xiao Wu symbolizes “what people sacrificed when they adopted a new set of values”.  

Like the Western Bildungsroman’s protagonist, Xiao Wu also works towards an unspoken goal of assimilation into society. Indeed, it is his failure to integrate into society, and to complete a successful Bildungsroman which makes this character’s fate so devastating. The last scene visually sums up Xiao Wu’s exile from the community. This single shot, which lasts for more than two minutes, follows the police chief and Xiao Wu walking down the street. The police chief must go inside a nearby office, so he handcuffs

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100 Jia Zhangke, Interview with Richard Havis, “Illusory Worlds: An Interview with Jia Zhangke,” Cineaste (Fall 2005), 58.
Xiao Wu to a metal telephone pole cord on the side of the street to wait. As Xiao Wu waits in a crouched position, the camera swivels around to his point of view, allowing the audience to see the mass of townspeople that slowly gather on the street to stare and point at the handcuffed criminal. This point-of-view shot encourages the audience, for the first time, to directly identify with the protagonist, letting them mutually experience the full devastation of Xiao Wu’s role as a spectacle: arrested, chained, and exposed to public ridicule. Further, Jia shoots all action previous to this scene using mostly medium long shots and long shots, always keeping the viewer at a distance, both physically and psychologically, from his actors. His break in the last scene from this consistent use of distanciation further encourages viewers to identify with the character; within the cinematic apparatus, the crowd becomes not simply the observers of this display of public humiliation and violence, but also the object of the gaze as the camera turns on them.

Jia’s portrayal of Xiao Wu’s coming of age adheres to Thomas Jeffer’s assertion that “a Bildungsroman…promotes the well-being of the individuated many as against the individuated (and isolated) few”. Because Jia’s entire narrative is centered around Xiao Wu’s relationships and interactions with members of this society, this ultimate exile and failure to complete a conventional Bildungsroman becomes all the more devastating, reinforcing Xiao Wu’s isolation and alienation. Scorsese sums up the effect of this last

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scene, writing that “there’s nothing sentimental about Wang Hongwei’s performance or about Jia’s approach to him, and somehow that makes the end of the film, where the protagonist is arrested, chained, and exposed to public ridicule, all the more devastating”. 102

In both this scene and in the scene right before Xiao Wu’s arrest, Jia also highlights the physical destruction of Fenyang as the shops and homes along the main street are prepared for demolition; many buildings are marked to be torn down, scrawled with signs of “chai” (“demolish”). This dismantling of Xiao Wu’s environment on the eve of his personal downfall speaks powerfully to the innate parallelism Jia establishes between his characters and their environments. Xiao Wu’s moral system is just as useless and outdated as the buildings now marked for destruction.

This last scene not only represents Xiao Wu’s tragic exile from his community, but it also references the conception of the “crowd” established by one of the most famous writers of modern Chinese literature, Lu Xun. In the preface to his classic “Call to Arms,” Lu Xun describes the spiritual ills of the Chinese, made evident in a scene documenting the imminent execution of an alleged Chinese spy during the Russo-Japanese War, in which a crowd of apathetic Chinese watch on silently. 103 This “crowd” of onlookers is a motif that occurs throughout Lu Xun’s fictional universe: staring at the madman in “Diary of a Madman” ("Kuangren riji"), eagerly awaiting the execution in “Medicine” (“Yao”), or gawking at Ah Q in disappointment when he gets shot instead of

decapitated in *The True Story of Ah Q (Ah Q zheng zhuan).* Jia’s last scene presents a similar scenario, featuring a large group of Chinese onlookers who congregate on the street to stare at Xiao Wu in his position of exile. They stare not out of sympathy, but out of sheer curiosity, and the uncomfortable way Xiao Wu holds his body and constantly glances around illustrates his discomfort. Jia brings special attention to the scene, using a long, still take focused exclusively on the aggregating crowd onlookers, highlighting this trait of Chinese society: people’s curiosity and their willingness to view their fellow man as spectacle.

Jia’s brutal conclusion also, however, points to a new twist on Lu Xun’s argument. Lu Xun wrote during a time of tumultuous political and social change – the end of the last dynastic era, the rise of the Republic. *Xiao Wu* is set during a new revolution, but rather than political, it is an economic revolution, and one that has proceeded to shake the spiritual, moral and even physical foundation of everyone in and around Fenyang. As Xiao Wu’s relationships collapse around him, so do the values he thought his family and friends shared, and so does any chance of love in an environment where everything is a commodity. The construction of Xiao Wu’s identity is contingent upon those around him; at the end of the film, when those relationships fall apart, he is left with nothing.

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Chapter 4 – The Parallel Development of Youth, National Economy and Culture in Platform

Jia’s second feature-length work is his 2000 film Platform. According to Jia, this was a film he had been planning out for years. He had to wait to shoot it, however, until he had enough funding, since he knew the budget would be larger than that of a smaller project like Xiao Wu.105

The film begins in 1979, again in Jia’s hometown of Fenyang. It follows the path of a small theatrical troupe called the Peasant Culture Group. One of the members, Zhang Jun, starts an affair with one of the actresses, Zhong Ping; his friend Cui Mingliang is attracted to another actress in the group, Yin Ruijian. The group are soon called together and told that official policy has changed - Western elements are to be introduced into performances, and groups such as theirs will be privately owned. They go on tour around the province, introducing Western-influenced pop music, costumes, and hairstyles into the act, eventually becoming the ‘All-Star Rock and Break-dance Group’. Zhong Ping quits the group and tells no one where she is going, and as audiences dwindle and bookings dry up, the entire group eventually returns to Fenyang and disbands. The last scene features Cui Mingliang, who has settled for marriage with his former girlfriend Ruijian in Fenyang.

Section 1 – Bildungsroman in Contention and Historical Implications

According to the definitions listed in the second chapter, Platform follows the Bildungsroman formula by utilizing a plot that is centered around the search for a meaning to life and deals with essentially passive protagonists. Even more critically, a

typical Bildungsroman narrative develops in a gradual and chronological manner and ends with the protagonist’s willing entry into the surrounding society.

The time span of *Platform* is also a period in which Jia himself was coming of age in Shanxi, and he draws heavily from his own experiences. This again links his work to that of the genre. Thomas Jeffers notes, for instance, a common autobiographical nature within the Bildungsroman, with narratives that often feature things that have happened to the author or to which the author feels close.

In addition, it is with this film that a comparison with the Western coming of age narrative is particularly fruitful; *Platform* not only follows the development or coming of age of its protagonists, but it follows this development against a background of social change. The protagonists’ ultimate entry into the surrounding society therefore punctuates the impact and implications of this drastic social change, and their personal Bildungsromans are emblematic of the rapid, large-scale economic and cultural development of the country that is happening simultaneously. Jia uses these two simultaneous paths to document the human effects of large-scale political, economic, and cultural change.

Edwin Mack elaborates on this, writing that “appreciating Jia’s films is an appreciation of China’s modern ideological history”. Socio-ideological engagements can be witnessed from the outset in *Platform*, whose narrative spans from 1979 to 1989.

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106 Jia, 190.
These dates are corroborated by the depiction of factual events, which Platform’s coming of age narrative is crucially linked to: the rapid economic and social changes that took place in China through the late 1970s and 1980s following Deng Xiaoping’s 1978 reforms. This, according to Jia, is the period of greatest change in China. Scholars like Xiaoping Lin and Elbert Ventura also interpret many of the details in this movie in an allegorical way, regarding Platform as “an allegorical epic that traces China’s snarled transition from Maoism to the economic liberalization of the 1980s”.

Jia sets a historically grounded tone with the opening of his film, in a town which awaits the reforms and improvements promised with the “Four Modernizations”. A group of old men stand around, joking and talking of local matters, but the frame is dominated by the “New Rural Development Plan Map” which fills up the wall behind them, depicting a drawing of a modern, well-planned, orderly city. This map sets the tone of the film, embodying the sense of hope and forward-looking which early promises of modernization held for people. This type of map was a common sight in towns around China soon after the announcement of the “Four Modernizations”. It also corresponds to the mindset of the protagonists, who are all looking forward to a seemingly bright future, excited by the Taiwanese pop music, bell-bottoms, and other international cultural influences that accompany this influx of economic reforms.

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111 Liu, 179.
Jia tightens this allegorical feel by constantly connecting these characters’ personal story arcs with the elements of political and social upheaval taking place in the country. When Zhong Ping, for instance, goes to the hospital to get an abortion, loudspeakers outside announce a military parade organized in honor of Deng Xiaoping. This link of the personal to the political is, according to reviewer Olivier De Bruyn, Jia’s unique contribution to the coming of age narrative. De Bruyn stresses that such rich individual and collective stories, given equal visibility, truly express “the universality of coming of age”.

The universality of this concept is indeed what lets Jia use the coming of age narrative in a new way, to highlight the specific social issues plaguing post-modern China. It reveals not only his commentary on the country, but also allows the audience to view Jia’s characters, whose motivations and actions very much represent that of typical young people coming of age in China in the 1980s, in a new light.

Jia’s use of a wide-angle lens and outdoor shooting allows him to utilize the heavy deep-focus found in the film’s many long shots. These long shots are is combined with framing elements throughout the film to additionally lend a grand, historical sense to the narrative. As his motivation, Jia said he wanted the camera to serve as an observer, preserving a distance between the era and the characters. His long shots linger, for instance, on panoramic views of important events, such as the tableau of the small rural city when it is first lit up with electricity.

They are also used when depicting the troupe’s performances. In the opening scene, for instance, the camera starts behind the first actor introducing the scene,

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displaying the full depth of the crowded hall, before cutting to a camera placed in the
back of the hall, depicting the point of view of an audience member watching the
performance framed onstage. This large frame, which dominates the shot, gives the
Peasant Cultural Group’s early performances grandness and an added importance, which
matches the ideological associations that famous Communist musical plays such as the
one they perform, “A Train Traveling Toward Shaoshan,” were meant to espouse. It
further matches the early mindset of people, who had a similar illusory sense of
grandness and hope for the future of the country.

Section 2 – Community Versus the Individual and Visual Style

In addition to adding a sense of historical grandness, however, these long shots
contribute to the film’s focus on interpersonal relationships and community over the
individual. This is how Platform, similar to Xiao Wu, also differs from the conventional
Bildungsroman – it again consciously denies the viewer access to protagonists’ inner
psychology. In this way, Jia remains consistent with the style established in Xiao Wu -
avoiding voice-over narration, and rarely using optical point-of-view or close-up shots of
the protagonist.

Also, his long shots again almost always include multiple characters within the shot.
Because viewers are denied access to direct identification with the protagonist, they are
forced to notice these other characters in the scene, which the camera values equally
within the shot and sometimes, through staging and framing, even favor over the
protagonist. Indeed, this is likely the reason some Western reviewers like journalist Philip
Kemp dislike the film upon first viewing. According to Kemp, Platform’s long, static
takes in extreme long-shot make it “difficult to engage with [Jia’s] characters”.114

Western critics like Kempt (who works for the British magazine “Sight & Sound”) are more familiar with first person or omniscient narrative technique, which, as mentioned in the previous section, include voice-over narration, point-of-view shots, and medium or close-up shots, all elements which Jia’s film almost exclusively avoids.

An example of Jia’s visual techniques, which systematically favor the group over the individual, can be seen in the shots of the troupe’s first meeting. In the scene, the group has just gotten done with a drive to the first city they are scheduled to perform at. After they arrive, they meet at the request of the director, who means to reprimand them for singing a parodied version of a patriotic Maoist song. As the group streams in, the staging is carefully arranged so that many members are visible through both tiered seating and a combination of sitting and standing. The director, who sits in the background, is visible through a gap in the circle of troupe members. Despite this carefully detailed staging, the majority of the group sits with faces turned either partially or fully away from the camera. By not showing any one member’s face, the shot encourage the viewer to focus on the group, not any one individual. The lighting in the scene comes primarily from a diegetic source, streaming from a large lamp near the director’s head. The camera is slightly off-center, revealing a well-lit red-draped stage behind the director to the left – the bright red in addition to the second diegetic light source, a lamp onstage, accents the depth of space within the scene.

When Zhang Jun is first singled out, emphasis on his figure is specifically avoided; he faces away from the camera, he is in partial shadow, and he is dressed in

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brown, unlike the bright pink coat of the fully-visible girl sitting to his foreground. Jia also intentionally draws attention away from Mingliang when he is subsequently called out. Although he stands up and stands in the foreground of the shot, his entire body is in shadow due to his placement directly between the diegetic light source and the camera. He is further turned away from the camera, and when he makes smart remarks, the audience’s attention is drawn to the reaction of troupe members whose faces are lit up, not towards Mingliang. Although audiences familiar with Classical Hollywood editing style and the Bildungsroman narrative will naturally try to sympathize and identify with the story’s individual protagonists, Jia’s systematic avoidance of standard subjective film techniques denies the viewer access to character psychology by cutting off all its signifiers. Enhancing this lack of subjective techniques with long shots, complementary staging, and framing devices, he forces the audience to pay attention to the group as a whole and the relationships within it.

This scene, in which the group dynamic is clearly the most important element, exemplifies the importance of community dynamics within Chinese society. It is located early in the film, before the troupe has been privatized or has converted its material to pop music. The director waits to reprimand Zhang Jun until he is in front of the entire group in order to shame him, and Mingliang volunteers himself, shamelessly belting the parodied version of the song, in order to define himself as a rebel. In this society, one’s position is only important in terms of how it is viewed by the community. One’s identity and value is based not upon his individual characteristics and strengths, but rather upon
his relationship to others within this community, an essential difference with the notion of
the individual within western culture.\textsuperscript{115}

The interaction between Cui Mingliang and Yin Ruijian in an early scene also
uses visual techniques to highlight the typical qualities of a new generation of young
people coming of age during this period. In the scene, which is shot in extreme long shot,
the couple descends the old city wall to talk, stopping in front of some old arches which
are part of the city wall framework. Ruijian stares at the ground, kicking around the
snow, as they discuss how well their friends are doing as a couple; Ruijian meagerly tries
to defend her father and reveals the arrangement made for her to meet with the dentist.

Most viewers watching this scene will find themselves expecting the camera to
zoom in or a cut to a closer shot in order to reveal the facial expressions and detailed
interactions between the characters. This would match the classical editing structure that
Hollywood films would normally use during the development of a key romance. The
scene, however, which lasts nearly five minutes, remains in this static extreme long shot,
refusing to cut in. Because the audience is not allowed to see a close-up or facial detail of
any one character, they are again forced to focus on the interplay between the two
characters and their relationship. At the end of the scene, instead of a response revealing
his emotions to Ruijian’s question, “why are you so happy?”, Mingliang, who is actually

\textsuperscript{115} Yang, Mayfair Mei-hui. \textit{Gifts, favors, and banquets : the art of social relationships in China}, (Ithica:
most likely extremely upset, simply turns towards a small fire that has started behind
them, and Ruijian similarly turns her entire body around to face this fire. The two stand,
motionless, in tableaux, both facing away from the camera. Their body language at this
last moment and their uncomfortable fidgeting throughout the scene illustrates their
difficulties in relating to one another, difficulties which a cultural and psychological
difference has suddenly caused. Instead of communicating, they just stand silently, facing
the futility of their situation. Jia’s rarely used non-diegetic music, a stringed arrangement,
punctuates this moment of melancholy. The music seeps in, creating a devastating
summary of these two young people and the unhappy fate of their relationship.

An arch column in the background also separates the two figures, and the
cavernous black space behind each draws further attention to this looming architecture.
This visual separation matches the division, both social and psychological, between the
two: Mingliang is rebellious, wants to leave Fenyang, and embraces the new influx of
pop cultural influences. Ruijian, on the other hand, is more traditional - Lin Xiaoping
discusses Ruijian’s character in terms of Confucian filial obligations; she ultimately
chooses to care for her father over Mingliang.116 The scene runs close to five minutes in a
single take, but the majority of it is consumed in stillness, punctuated only with sparse
dialogue and the ambient sound of marching soldiers; it is as if the invisible soldiers
signify Ruijian's imprisonment. Similarly, Mingliang’s exit is suggested in the same
sound mix: after leaping from the boundary walls and out of the frame, he escapes the
garrison of the mise-en-scène. According to Lin, Ruijian, listening intently to an off-

116 Lin Xiaoping. “Jia Zhangke’s Cinematic Trilogy: A Journey across the Ruins of Post-Mao China,”
Chinese-Language Film: Historiography, Poetics, Politics. Ed. Sheldon Lu and Emilie Yeh. (Honolulu:
University of Hawaii Press, 2005), 197.
screen transport announcement and framed in an even deeper focus shot, is here visually and metaphorically diminished in stature.\textsuperscript{117}

Ironically, however, it turns out that this imprisonment of traditional life in Fenyang that Mingliang seems sure to escape is exactly the fate that he returns to. The same music used here seeps into another scene featuring Mingliang and Ruijian near the end of the film, this time slower and more naturalistic. The scene again ends with a tableau in which both look down at their cigarettes without speaking. Instead of leaving each other, the fate they now face is an uneventful, traditional life in Fenyang.

\textbf{Section 3 – Inter-Personal Relationships}

Unlike the single conventional young male who usually serves as the Bildungsroman central protagonist, \textit{Platform} follows four the journey and relationships of four young protagonists in their transition from inexperience to knowledge. It begins and ends with the couple Yin Ruijian and Cui Mingliang (whom is played by the same actor as Xiao Wu). At the beginning of the film, Ruijian’s strict, traditional father dissuades her from seeing Mingliang. He does not like Mingliang’s profession, a performer, and instead arranges for his daughter to meet with a dentist. Due to her father’s wishes, Ruijian eventually breaks up with Mingliang, telling him they are not right for each other.

Instead of leaving each other, the fate they face at the end of the film, however, is a traditional life in Fenyang. This ending also interestingly adheres to the to the Bildungsroman genre conventions, in which protagonists enter into the surrounding society. Unlike Xiao Wu, who fails to complete a successful Bildungsroman and is

\textsuperscript{117} Lin Xiaoping, 199-200.
ostracized and alienated, this couple enters into the Fenyang community; Ruijian has a job as a tax agent, and she and Mingliang represent a typical young family with a toddler. For them, however, this successful assimilation into Fenyang society represents failure – by remaining in Fenyang, their aspirations to become active participants in world culture remain unfulfilled. As Valerie Jaffee sums up how she reads the film’s principal theme, *Platform* is about “the failure of young Chinese people to escape their desolate home for an imagined greater ‘world’”.[118]

By contrast, the start of the second couple’s, Zheng Jun and Zhong Ping’s, modern, seemingly ideal relationship embodies the feeling of hope and forward-looking that filled the consciousness of many young people in the 1980s. The relationship is both modern: the two openly sleep together and are not married, and has a seemingly bright future: Zhong Ping’s family likes Zheng Jun, and as performers, they are able to remain together while touring. Because of this, their relationships can be read as a symbol, representing the psychological outlook of many young people in that time period whose futures looked bright, influenced by the promises of prosperity and modernization brought with the economic and social reforms. Similar to many people’s subsequent disillusionment with these reforms, however, Zheng Jun and Zhong Ping’s “modern” and ideal relationships is soon exposed for its many flaws. During a stop in one of the rural Shanxi towns, the director is called to get them from the authorities – the two have been apprehended and are invasively questioned by the local authorities for sharing a room without being married. In this sequence, Jia exposes the true effect of national reforms: although international culture and capitalist economic influence may have brought pop

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music and consumer goods into the country, the laws and quality of life for much of the country remains untouched by modernization or reform, still relying on traditional values and ways of doing things. Zheng Jun and Zhong Ping’s “modern,” progressive lifestyle therefore only serves to alienate them from the community.

Zhong Ping is later forced by Zheng Jun and the director to get an abortion. Soon after she becomes moody and irritable, and eventually leaves the group, telling no one where she is going. The disillusionment and decline of this idealistic, upbeat young girl whose permed hair at the beginning of the film represented her embrace of global culture embodies the feelings of a young, upbeat generation of Chinese people coming of age in the 1980s. The devastating turn that both her life and her relationship with Zhong Ping takes, while extreme, mirrors the disillusionment and problems that many young people faced during their own journey to adulthood and search for meaningful relationships.

The development and change that occurs between Mingliang’s parents is another example of how modernization affected the most intimate relationships, those inside the home. Mingliang’s father is first depicted as a traditional head of the house, performing manual labor and acting skeptically towards his son’s choice of profession and trendy new clothing. During the film’s progression, however, as Mingliang’s group adopts more modern music and becomes privatized, the relationship within his own home in Fenyang deteriorates. By the end of the film, his father, who once berated his sons for their poor moral character, ends up abandoning his family for a younger second wife. As much of a portrait of Cui Mingliang’s generation’s journey and struggle to find their way, Platform is also a critique of how the older generation has lost their bearings amid a rising tide of reforms that contradict and negate their socialist education and previous life experience.
As Jia said of his own coming of age during this time period, “We…saw traditional Chinese culture collapsing around us”.\textsuperscript{119}

**Section 4 – Train Motif**

A platform (zhantai) is literally the stage or raised area on which passengers stand to wait for a train. Jia utilizes various elements of the train throughout the film to create an elaborate set of motifs which reinforce the ultimate clash between idealism and reality that face his young protagonists as they come of age. The motif of a train whistle, for instance, first appears at the beginning of the film, which opens with a black screen accompanied by a long, droning, high-pitched whistle. This whistle serves as a non-diegetic signifier of the imaginary train about to leave the station, and of Jia’s cinematic train of memories that will take the audience back to his hometown and the era of his youth.

The next appearance takes place when the troupe boards the coach after the performance and counts off a roll call. Within the same shot, the coach sets off in motion while the lights go out for the superimposed title sequence, and the audience must rely exclusively on the sound mix to understand what is happening. According to Edwin Mak, troupe members’ spontaneous mimicry of the train’s sound while onboard, followed by unsettled yelps of hysteria, reflect an uncertain expression of both excitement and fear. This train serves as a metaphor for Chinese society, which waits expectantly and fearfully on a platform for reform and modernization. This ideological unknown that most Chinese were venturing into, Mak adds, can be seen as the excitement of a liberal freedom, but at the expense of dispensing with the safety of socialism.\textsuperscript{120}

\textsuperscript{119} Jia Zhangke, Interview with Richard James Havis, *Illusory Worlds*, 58.
\textsuperscript{120} Mak, 4.
A train whistle next appears while the troupe, stopped in a barren, uninhabited part of the road, encounters a train; they all hear it coming and begin madly running towards the tracks. As the protagonists stand waiting on the empty track, however, the sound of the train whistle continues, but the train is never shown. This motif also reappears in the final scene of the film; as Ruijian holds their infant child in her arms and Cui Mingliang is slumped over dozing on the couch, a tea kettle begins to whistle. This sound soon collapses, however, into an un-naturalistic, larger whistle noise - the same noise used in the film’s opening. By referencing the beginning of the film, Jia highlights the entire journey of the young protagonists, from idealistic youth to domesticated adults in Fenyang, and the completion of their Bildungsroman. As Jia explains, “they were once rebellious, they once pursued their ideals and dreams, but in the end they returned to everyday life— which is where most people eventually end up. They return to the trappings of the everyday”. The physical mobility that the train represents, actual and not merely virtual or mediated encounters with world culture, therefore remains unfulfilled at the film’s end.

The train as a symbol for mobility and modernity has been used in much earlier contexts, from British colonial iconography to Soviet propaganda. Beginning in 1918, for  

example, the Bolsheviks sent agit-trains around Russia decorated with depictions of Revolutionary events and themes, which were important symbols of Bolshevik power in large part because the train was a symbol of modernity.\textsuperscript{123}

Writer Abrahm Lustgarten latches onto this same symbolism used on a grander scale in present-day China, with his documentation of a recently-completed railway project connecting Lhasa to Beijing. As the railway—the highest and steepest in the world—extends to Lhasa and China’s “Go West” campaign delivers waves of rural poor to Tibet eager to make their fortunes, Lustgarten documents both the benefits and costs of rapid development on the country’s people.\textsuperscript{124} The larger symbolic message of modernity and progress that the train holds for Jia’s youth can therefore be found in the messages and iconography still utilized by the Chinese government today.

While these national messages of modernization and progress combined with the style and ideology of Western pop music imbued Jia’s young protagonists with a sense of hope, Mingliang and the others find no success and eventually end up back where they started, relegated to a life without prospects in their hometown. The platform is therefore not a physical site, but a symbolic transition of space, located between the past and the present, the country and the city, tradition and modernity, where time is dominated by waiting. Journalist Richard Havis sums up this message well, explaining that in \textit{Platform}, “the characters are metaphorically waiting at the platform for the benefits of the new society, but the train bearing these…goods seems fated never to arrive”.\textsuperscript{125}

\textsuperscript{125} Havis, Richard. “Illusory Worlds: An Interview with Jia Zhangke,” \textit{Cineaste} (Fall 2005), 58.
Jia F Focuses His Study, Expands His Technique: A Study of Dead-End Youth in Unknown Pleasures

By the time Jia Zhangke made his third film *Unknown Pleasures* in 2002, he was already internationally recognized and had received a large amount of critical acclaim. The film screened at several international festivals, including Cannes, New York, Toronto, and Singapore. Unlike his first two films, shot using 16mm film and 35mm film, *Unknown Pleasures* was shot entirely in digital video (DV), and production took a total of only 19 days.

The film, which is set in the Shanxi city of Datong, follows the story of two best friends Xiao Ji and Bin Bin, who are both 19 and unemployed. Xiao Ji develops a crush on Qiao Qiao, a dancer who works publicizing liquor. He also attempts to pick a fight with her former gym teacher turned lover Qiao San, whose shady financial deals have made him a powerful local entrepreneur, and Xiao Ji is eventually roughed up by Qiao San’s men in a disco club. He later meets again with Qiao Qiao, and they hide out in a hotel. Bin Bin has a studious girlfriend who applies to study in Beijing and is accepted. He simultaneously decides to apply for the army, but is rejected when his blood test reveals hepatitis. Near the end of the film, Xiao Ji and Bin Bin decide to rob a bank using a fake bomb. When Bin Bin enters the bank, however, he is immediately arrested; Xiao Ji drives away, but his motorcycle breaks down and he hitchs a ride out of town.

**Section 1 – Bildungsroman and Relationships, the Individual versus the Community at Large**

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Bin Bin and Xiao Ji, much like Xiao Wu, are the archetypal Bildungsroman protagonists: two young men whose stories are followed in a gradual and chronological manner as they develop love interests, gain knowledge, and mature into adulthood. The film adheres to the depiction, as described in chapter two, of this development as a process, which allows it to examine in detail how specific elements of the process are affected by modern Chinese society and culture.

Like Xiao Wu, the protagonists are portrayed at the conclusion of the film as outcasts and criminals. This conclusion again subverts the genre’s conventions, which entail a willing entry into surrounding society. By first establishing a normative representation of the genre through character type, however, the film draws attention to its deliberately subversive ending, which is particularly bleak and jarring. Like Xiao Wu, Bin Bin is in police custody at the end of the film, humiliated and scared. Xiao Ji is in a similarly dire situation; their journey through the film towards a state of greater knowledge and maturity therefore ends in a state utterly devoid of hope or promise for the future. For these characters, it is their dissent from the group that ostracizes them.

These characters also have this lack of meaningful motivation written on their faces; several scenes feature Xiao Ji and Qiao Qiao standing at the edge of the crowd, against the wall, or on the bleak roadside, smoking and staring blankly, their faces expressionless. Although this characteristic ennui and passivity at times almost seems a caricature, their stares are blank precisely because they have nothing to look forward to; they have no motivation and no meaningful, hope-filled future.

In this way, they represent a much broader subsection of population: marginalized groups including rural workers and urban migrant workers, whose lives are documented
by Li Zhang in his study of class divisions and income gaps in contemporary China. Although these laborers pursue the same freedom, consumerism, and access to global cultural flows celebrated by more privileged members of their society, they often find themselves “trapped in the dark underside of the globalizing political economy”\(^\text{128}\).

These characters also share the characteristic of Bildungsroman protagonists as described by Thomas Jeffers, who notes that these young men either have fathers who are absent (Bin Bin) or they have fathers who are tyrannical or feckless (Xiao Ji). Bin Bin and Xiao Ji’s posturing also highlights the sensitivity they cover up, which Jeffers notes is usually paired with a “lively imagination…frustrated by [their] neighbors’ and family’s social prejudices and intellectual obtuseness” within the genre.\(^\text{129}\) Finally, Jeffers notes that the Bildungsroman is often patriotic, a celebration of a political and social system that promotes the well-being of the individuated many as against the individuated (and isolated) few. In Jia’s portrait of post-modern Chinese society, however, there is no celebration of the protagonists’ individuated selves, and they are unable to integrate into the “many.” They remain throughout the film as part of the “few,” whom Jeffers defines as alienated outcasts.\(^\text{130}\)

Jia grounds the narrative of personal development and creation in *Unknown Pleasures* with the development and creation of protagonists’ interpersonal relationships. According to Jia, the dynamic of people fighting to form small-scale human relationships while struggling with the forces of history is a theme that he unconsciously began to

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\(^{129}\) Jeffers, Thomas L. *The Bildungsroman from Goethe to Santayana*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 70.

\(^{130}\) Jeffers, 72.
explore while making *Platform.* As his follow-up film, *Unknown Pleasures* further explores and refines this theme. Jia uses *Unknown Pleasures* to focus exclusively on the state of relationships at a micro level, among Chinese youth. The narrative itself supports this emphasis on pairing, giving equal screen time to the two protagonists, never favoring one over the other.

Relationships again serve as the central part of the Chinese Bildungsroman, illustrating the key difference between Chinese and Western cultures. Relationships formed during this coming of age process are the most fragile, and they influence the direction and types of future relationships a young protagonist will face for the rest of his adult life. This is precisely why Jia focuses on young protagonists at this stage of their lives – their disillusionment and alienation stems from the knowledge that for the entirety of their future as adults, there is no hope for change.

Like *Xiao Wu,* the film is again centered around a series of these character relationships: Qiao Qiao’s relationship with Xiao Ji, her relationship with Qiao San, and the relationship between Bin Bin and his girlfriend Yuan Yuan.

Bin Bin and Yuan Yuan’s interactions are characteristic of the way Jia’s previous two films depict young people’s relationships: the two are both reticent and shy, and the development of their relationship plays out largely within the video parlor where they periodically meet. Like Xiao Wu and Mei Mei, the two spend much of their time sitting and staring at the TV screen, one of many examples of the effects of the economic

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driving force of consumerism which developed throughout the 1980s and 1990s: the invasion of electronics into every facet of life for this developing generation.\footnote{Latham, Kevin. “Consumption and Cultural Change in Contemporary China,” Consuming China: Approaches to Cultural Change in Contemporary China (New York: Routledge, 2006), 1.}

Their relationship is strained when Yuan Yuan informs him that they should not see each other while she studies for her exams; she tells him of her plan to apply for college to study International Trade, making mention of China’s recent membership with the World Trade Organization. The tension builds to a climax when she is accepted to a university in Beijing. While she will leave their hometown and most likely pursue a prosperous, moneymaking job in the new global market economy, Bin Bin will be left behind in Datong. While Bin Bin tries to avoid this fate by applying for the army after persuasion from his mother, his hopes are entirely and finally crushed when he is informed he cannot enlist because he has hepatitis.

Both Bin Bin and Xiao Wu’s situations illustrate the predicament of many rural, uneducated Chinese, who witness the influence of economic development all around them but who personally receive no benefit from it. According to Edwin Mak supports this argument, noting that Bin Bin’s alienation could be viewed as a pitfall of China’s globalized ambitions, an example that not all are able to partake in the new competition.\footnote{Mak, Edwin. “Postsocialist Grit: Contending Realisms in Jia Zhangke’s Platform and Unknown Pleasures,” O\v{s}creen 12, Issue 7 (Dec. 2007), 3.} Philippe Massonnet further depicts Chinese in this situation as remnants of the “old habits” like the welfare state, which fostered carelessness and laziness.\footnote{Massonnet, Philippe. The New China: Money, Sex, and Power, [transl. Hannah Tiebe] (Boston: Tuttle Publishing, 1999), 2.} Bin Bin and Yuan Yuan’s relationship parallels that of Xiao Wu and his old friend Xiao Yong. Xiao Wu returns home to find that Xiao Yong has prospered economically as a
private entrepreneur, and, due to its risk to his public reputation, has decided to forsake their friendship. For both protagonists, therefore, the person they were formerly close with decides to betray them, destroying their relationship in favor of economic ambitions.

In the next scene, Bin Bin revisits the masseuse he has already reluctantly seen earlier in the film (and from whom he quite possibly became infected with hepatitis). Following Deng Xiaoping’s program of economic reforms, many state-owned enterprises vanished, taking jobs with them. This caused a boom in the prostitution industry, particularly in west China, which Jia accurately reflects with this secondary narrative.136 Ironically, it is therefore the same forces of capitalism that both prevent Bin Bin from improving his quality of life by joining the army and inspire his girlfriend to leave him.

According to reviewer Kent Jones, the relationship between Bin Bin and Yuan Yuan, which he describes as “two insecure people prone to recoil from the slightest shift in routine,” dramatizes large-scale change.137 On a larger scale, the personal and economic devastation that both Bin Bin and Xiao Ji face can indeed be read as a symbol of the larger-scale setbacks that city-dwellers all over central and western China face. While Bin Bin’s girlfriend and Xiao Yong are examples of those ambitious individuals willing to sacrifice anything for financial success, Bin Bin and Xiao Wu represent those few who value personal relationships and are therefore left behind.

Qiao San, Qiao Qiao’s former gym teacher and manager, can be interpreted as a more exaggerated, extreme version of Xiao Wu’s young entrepreneur Xiao Yong. Qiao San has also taken full advantage of China’s new capitalist society, becoming a

137 Jones, Kent. “Unknown Pleasures, A Hunting Study of Dead-End Youth in a Rapidly Changing World, Confirms China’s Jia Zhangke as a Master of Modern Alienation” Film Comment 38, no. 5 (2002), 44.
successful businessman managing a club used as a front for prostitution. He even manages Qiao Qiao’s career as a dancer and promoter for Mongolian King Liquor, itself an exaggerated example of the influence of consumerism and commercialization into every aspect of the young protagonists’ lives.

While in Xiao Wu, Xiao Yong’s back-story is relatively limited and his fiancée is never shown, Qiao San’s character is more fully developed, and the film closely follows the progress of his and Qiao Qiao’s relationship. The relationship itself reflects what he values in society: public appearances or showing face. In Chinese society, “face” signifies the social standing and social connections of a man. He has therefore chosen Qiao Qiao as a girlfriend because she is good-looking and a popular performer. It is obvious, however, he does not really care for Qiao Qiao’s concerns or well-being; when Xiao Ji confronts him openly at the liquor promotion, for example, he refuses to bother defending her publicly, saying he doesn’t fight over women. Instead, he has his men rough up Xiao Ji in a disco club, out of sight. Like Xiao Yong, his actions demonstrate his ability to adapt his own values to the changing culture, in which lying and manipulation are valued over honesty and openness.

This also highlights the central positioning of money and material gains throughout the film. Popular writer Liang Xiaosheng once described the uncontrollable thirst for money in contemporary China as a madness that was comparable only to the political fever of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. This money madness is illustrated through Qiao San’s corruption and greed, but it truly emerges front

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139 (97)
and center through Jia’s narrative account of Xiao Ji and Bin Bin’s adventure. For Bin Bin and Xiao Ji, after they realize that their dreams are destined to fail, the pursuit of money becomes the end in itself, their desire a product of a pervasive commercial culture and pup-culture gangster fantasies. The material messages that inundate the characters’ lives not only become a central theme of the film, but the primary mechanism that transforms what could have been a typical coming of age story into a tragic parable of undoing.

Qiao San’s death perhaps best reflects these new values by which he lived his life; Bin Bin learns of the death from the money dealer (also named Xiao Wu, Jia’s self-aware nod to his first film) while he examines a wreath bought for the funeral procession. When he informs Bin Bin of the death, however, there is no sympathy in his voice; although he had many dealings with Qiao San, his only concern is whether or not the wreath is impressive and expensive enough. In the next scene, the camera pans to follow the extravagant array of wreaths as they are paraded, following tradition, down a busy commercial street; the shot is dominated, however, by the congestion of traffic and by the huge malls and commercial establishments that line the road. This shot serves as a visual representation of the emblematic values of his character, for whom commercial success and wealth dominated over values of community and integrity.

As they watch the parade, Bin Bin notes that Qiao San’s life was pretty long, referencing the great general Yue Fei, who died at 36. This reference to a grand historical figure, who is known all over China as a symbol of nationalist spirit, only further illustrates the disconnect these young protagonists have from their parents’ generation and from the government, which venerates and highly values such historical heroes in
China’s history as part of an underlying support of nationalism. It further underscores the context in which these young protagonists live; they live in, as Jia describes it, the “dangxiaxing,” the “here and now”.\textsuperscript{140} Xiao Ji ends the conversation by concluding, “what’s so great about a long life? 30 Years is long enough.” This reminds viewers of the protagonists’ coming of age into adulthood, and the fact that they see the lives they are developing as worthless, without economic hope or opportunities. Living in Datong, their situation parallels that of Xiao Wu in Fenyang: they are all part of the increasingly powerless working class.

Bin Bin’s relationship with his mother serves to demonstrate the change to relationships within the home existing in post-modern china. Yan Yunxiang, in his study on the change of Chinese inter-family relations over a period 50 years, notes that during the span of the 1980s and 1990s, filial piety became less important, with conjugal bonds becoming more important than those between separate generations of parents and children. He also notes that the elderly lost authority; young adults usurped their parents’ roles as household heads, and many sons began claiming their inheritance as soon as they were married.\textsuperscript{141} The communication between Bin Bin and his mother illustrates this change in addition to the gap in understanding of acceptable behavior between generations: Bin Bin lies to his mother about his job, tells her off in the street, and blatantly disregards her wishes throughout much of the film.

Jin Liu, who studied the differing dialects of many of Jia’s central characters, notes that instead of their parents’ regional dialect, both high school-educated boys speak Putonghua. According to Jin, this illustrates the decisive role that the educational system

\textsuperscript{140} Jia Zhangke, interview with Michael Berry. \textit{Film Comment} 39, No. 2 (2003), 62.

as an institution plays in the standardization, legitimization, and imposition of an official
language. She notes that the dialectical relation between the education system and the
labor market devalues local dialects, which are often dismissed as uneducated and
course. Because all youth now coming of age in China have been educated using
Putonghua, it instantly serves as a symbol of the new generation. Further, because most
of their parents’ generation speaks local dialects, it serves as yet another element of
stratification within the home, between family members, which is seen in both Zhantai
and Xiao Wu.

Xiao Ji and Bin Bin’s attitudes also illustrate a fundamental change in the way
young Chinese people relate to their parents. When Xiao Ji asks Qiao San how her father
is doing in the hospital, she replies, “he is fine, just old.” In the previous scene, as Qiao
San stands next to her father in the hospital, he begins to cry. She responds callously,
claiming he is “too old to cry.” Although she appears remorseful and genuinely
concerned for her father, she is obviously unable to communicate her sympathy. Further,
in this shot she stands prominently in the foreground, facing towards the camera. Her
father, meanwhile, lies on a bed in the background, covered with blankets and barely
visible. The shot therefore visualizes her role as a member of the socially assertive and
dominant new younger generation. The change in young people’s attitudes towards their
parents is also apparent in the next scene; in response to Qiao San telling Xiao Ji her
father is dead, he replies it is “good for her,” and goes on to explain his mistrust and lack
of communication with his own father.

142 Jin Liu, “The Rhetoric of Local Languages as the Marginal: Chinese Underground and Independent
Films by Jia Zhangke and Others,” Modern Chinese Literature and Culture, vol. 18, no. 2 (Fall 2006), 183-184.
According to Phillippe Massonnet, differing conceptions of how to relate to one’s elders are commonplace for young people in China today. While relationships rooted in Confucian family and kinship constructions of persons including the Five Bonds depicted the traditional image of a Chinese household with three or four generations living in harmony under the same roof with absolute respect for filial piety, the state of the Chinese household today has evolved rapidly. Contemporary Chinese literature and cinema abound with stories of shattered families, quarrels, and wives denouncing their husband’s faults to parents; many young people now even consider putting their parents in Chinese retirement homes. By illustrating the degradation of these relationships, Jia’s films maintain a constant awareness of the dominating influence of new value systems and changing post-modern culture that caused it.

Section 2 – Visual Style

*Unknown Pleasures* is first of all different from Jia’s previous films because it is shot entirely in DV. According to Jia, it was chosen in part because the cheapness and flexibility of using digital cameras meant a more streamlined production and greater ease of movement. Kent Jones comments on Jia’s use of DV, describing it as a form which feels apt for its present-tense narrative. Jia himself elaborates on this: he cites Fifth Generation director Chen Kaige’s statement that film should be used as “a vehicle to describe legend” as one with which Jia could “not disagree more”. Jia said that he instead wants to express the “here and now” [dang xia xing] in his films. For him, this

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145 Jia, 64.
146 Jones, 45.
147 Jia, 63.
medium provides a link to character subjectivity that is otherwise unavailable through traditional techniques such as voice-over narration and point-of-view shots. According to Jia, the use of DV also produced a slight color discrepancy that lent itself to the tone he wanted the film to take.148

Stylistically, Jia still makes heavy use of his characteristic long takes and continues to use predominantly long shots in this film. As Jason McGrath observes, “the average shot length…further expanding to nearly a minute and a half…including almost painfully slow and deliberate pans,” can be described as bewildering or even uncomfortable, but this is intentional.149 Unknown Pleasures encourages this empathy with the ambivalent future the protagonists experience; indirectly, viewers experience the same time these marginal members of the society experience. Exemplar of this notion is Xiao Ji’s solipsistic motorcycle scene, an extreme long shot where in one long take, Xiao Ji struggles to ride his scooter up a desolate hill; at each attempt the modest scooter engine cuts off, as if overwhelmed by Xiao’s demands. This action is repeated as the camera steadfastly focuses on the banality of this task; after nearly three minutes of screen time, on the eighth attempt he finally succeeds. In hindsight, the scene and task is completed devoid of incentive or recourse. More than being an invitation, the scene is an imposition on audiences to empathize with the inertia, absurdity, and bewilderment of Xiao Ji’s moment.

The absurdity of this scene further embodies one of the themes of the film, which involves youth as they come of age confronting the illusory promised land created by

148 Jaffee, 7.
global consumerism. The youth in Platform end their journey in a similar position to that of Xiao Ji and Bin Bin – while they spend most of the film following their aspirations, they conclude the film entering a new decade forced to return home to Fenyang, unable to fulfill aspirations to become active participants in world culture. The young people in Unknown Pleasures are part of a new generation that must confront the realities and monotony of their lives, unable to escape their desolate Shanxi home for an imagined greater “world.”

Each of the three main characters tries to achieve a state of "Ren Xiao Yao" – the title of the film, which roughly translates as “freedom from all constraints.” This phrase and concept appears multiple times in the film. As described by Qiao Qiao, it is part of the philosophy of the Taoist Zhuangzi; she refers to the belief that life is the pursuit of absolute freedom and pleasure. Jia elaborates on this concept, writing that “because many people do not believe they have any future, they splurge on excessive enjoyment, as if life might end tomorrow”. According to Jia, the entire film tries to recreate this atmosphere.

To do this, his heavy use of framing, color, and lighting techniques which emphasize the community over the individual as seen in Xiao Wu and Platform are downplayed. This film also features few group shots; the majority of the film’s scenes contain only two characters, and medium shots are used more frequently than in either of the last two films. Instead, Unknown Pleasures introduces a heavy use of dramatization, featured mostly during long, static medium shots. It is this dramatization which serves, in part, to replace or enhance techniques use in previous films to limit access to character

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151 Lu, 126.
psychology. This dramatization is demonstrated through characters’ exaggerated confidence and posturing, paired with imitations of American commercial movies like *Pulp Fiction*. Jia also pairs it, however, with his characteristic long takes in the form of characters holding tableau-like poses, often motionless for several seconds.

A scene featuring Qiao Qiao and Xiao Ji after he has been roughed up by her boyfriend provides a good example of this. The scene begins with an extreme long shot of Qiao Qiao as she walks through a desolate strip of construction mud and dirt to the bus stop. Shot from the road, the mise-en-scene provides a rough graphic match to the earlier shot of Xiao Ji trying to start his motorcycle; the viewer’s eye is again distinctly drawn towards her and her clothing, a spot of bright blue and turquoise over a uniformly colored background of mud and gray-brown hi-rise apartments. The contrast between her clothing and the dominating gray landscape mimics the contrast between the young protagonist’s dreams of glamour and the realities of her life in Datong.

Unlike the static take used for the shot of Xiao Ji on his motorbike, however, the camera follows her, panning to her position standing at the edge of the road. Xiao Ji approaches on his motorcycle, and the camera cuts almost 180 degrees to a medium shot of the two. While Xiao Ji stands directly in front of Qiao Qiao, she turns her head towards the camera, at first seemingly looking for the bus, but then simply holding an
extended static pose. Xiao Ji, who is staged to her left facing directly towards her, also holds this pose for the duration of the scene, nearly 40 seconds. 

Their silence and blank stares deny audience subjective access to the characters’ thoughts, almost to the point of exaggeration. An iconic shot, this image was chosen for many of the posters and promotional photos of the film. This is because, while there exists Jia’s characteristic gap between viewer and character psychology, their dramatization and staging also creates a powerful static image. It represents the conflicted feelings the characters have for one another, while the physical immobility and silence of the two embodies the desolate hopelessness of their constrained lives. In his comments about the film’s theme, Jia writes that while young people in China seemingly “refuse all constraints,” run their own lives, and act independently, “their spirit is not as free”.152

The scene in which Bin Bin last meets his girlfriend also uses character staging and silence to depict the protagonist’s conflicted feelings and sense of hopelessness. Set at the communal hall, it echoes the film’s opening, in which Bin Bin’s first appearance, wandering aimlessly through the large hall, depicts the drifting ennui of young people coming of age at its height. Mirroring the pattern between Cui Mingliang and Ruijian established in Platform, Bin Bin sits at a booth, obscured from view. Instead of characters

moving in and out visual obstruction, however, Jia begins by using classical Hollywood shot-reverse-shot editing techniques to shift from one character to the other. After Yuan opens the cell phone he’s bought for her and tells him he can easily contact her in the future, however, a static medium shot holds on Bin Bin for almost three minutes. He sits silently for almost 15 seconds before responding, “there is no future.” His silence is punctuated by the relative lack of diegetic noise, which includes only faint traffic sounds throughout most of the scene. Although the medium shot reveals details of Bin Bin’s expression and response, his subdued acting punctuated by silence and blank stare, similar to that of Xiao Ji and Qiao Qiao, refuses the viewer subjective alignment.

In the final two shots, he looks on as Yuan Yuan lingers in the hall; she eventually cycles through the doors and out of shot. The familiar transport announcement which streams in at the end of the scene underscores her freedom as Bin Bin is consigned to her past, completing the pattern in an elegant naturalistic manner.

The juxtaposition of Yuan Yuan’s graceful movement, which takes up most of the frame, to Bin Bin’s tiny, static figure represents the difference between the future lives of each character and underscores the constraint and hopelessness of Bin Bin’s future.

Through a combination of long takes, staging, and dramatization, Jia therefore both maintains and builds upon the style used in his previous two films, which functions
to both deny access to character subjectivity while representing and commenting upon the status of developing relationships of youth in contemporary China.
Chapter 6 – The Invasion of Popular Culture: Relationships, Identity, and Chinese Youth

In China, the particular reliance on traditional ideas, systems, mores, and ethics means that the clash between this traditional culture and the rapid influx of popular culture and consumerism during the Reform era created especially massive social and cultural changes. ¹⁵³ Along with a surge in consumerism, Western commercial popular culture in the form of fashion, music, movies, and past-times such as karaoke were allowed to surge in following the implementation of Deng Xiaoping’s Economic Reforms. ¹⁵⁴ This Reform period also brought greater openness and access, and much of this influx was not opposed, as one would expect, by the Communist party. Liu Kang, in his article on popular culture in contemporary China, cites influences like MTV, which was already selectively broadcast in China via Hong Kong satellite channels in 1992. ¹⁵⁵ Further, for most Chinese, the effects of these new influences were felt at the level of everyday life.¹⁵⁶

For an analysis of these factors, Jia’s focus on youth coming of age is particularly useful, since youth in China are most often the most targeted by and the most susceptible to the influence of modern popular entertainment.¹⁵⁷ Liu supports this view, stating that “popular culture is primarily an urban youth cultural phenomenon”.¹⁵⁸

Again, I focus on these youth and their coming-of-age processes in order to argue that while Jia’s films accommodate many conventional Western Bildungsroman genre

¹⁵⁶ Liu, 103.
¹⁵⁷ Chandra, 6.
¹⁵⁸ Liu, 109.
conventions, they stylistically deviate by downplaying the individualism which is a characteristic of many Western narratives. plays with the pull between individualism and Chinese traditional social relations, Jia reflects the conflict between generations and between Western ideas and Chinese traditional culture playing out in Chinese society today. Jia depicts much of this conflict as a direct result of this popular culture invasion, and throughout these three films, he uses it to illustrate the damage to inter-personal relationships, value systems, and communication into virtually all avenues of young life.

In these films new forms of entertainment are most often shown to hinder communication by promoting Western ideals which are often at odds with Chinese social structures, tradition, values, and lifestyles. Jia focuses on the establishment of new values and the complications and alteration to Chinese traditions brought with this influx of globalization, particularly those confronting contemporary youth. While he has never denied the benefits to society that popular culture may create, the locations, strata of people, and stories Jia chooses to shoot more broadly reflect its negative impact. The way he depicts his protagonists illustrates how the influence of global pop culture serves to alienate and separate people from one another.

Elisabeth Croll, in her anthropological study of China’s social changes in the 1980s and 1990s, supports this view. She argues that the introduction and rapid profusion of consumer goods and global forms of entertainment changed the relationship between persons and persons and between persons and goods. She explains that this created cultural dualities such as socialism and capitalism, local and global, Chinese and cosmopolitan or Western, and tradition and modernity; these dualities were then

159 Wu, 10.
incorporated into people’s contemporary and conscious processes of self-definition or formation of identity.\textsuperscript{160}

Croll references, for instance, the introduction of blue jeans into China, which students associated with independence and individuality, in contrast with the “sense of dependence” and conformity that Mao suits implied. She likens this to the Chinese appropriation of Western fashion, jewelry, and cosmetics, all examples of things used to recraft or fashion a new identity.\textsuperscript{161} Jia confronts this youth phenomenon directly in his films. In \textit{Platform}, for instance, Cui Minglinang gets bell-bottom jeans which both perplex his parents and arouse their disapproval. Soon after, Zhong Ping boldly decides to get a perm. Although first singled out and even ridiculed by the troupe director, they soon after joke that she looks “Spanish” and they could use her in an exotic Spanish dance. The scene cuts to the group in the practice hall, where she is depicted flamboyantly dancing in a bright red, Spanish-style dress across the hall. Meanwhile, a large portrait of Mao hangs on the back wall of the dance space, dominating the background.

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{Young people in a dance studio in China.}
\end{figure}


\textsuperscript{161} Croll, 26.
This image clearly depicts the conflicting influences that assailed these young dance troupe members, forced to formulate identities in a confused, uncertain environment with no model of reference on which to base their decisions.

Croll references interviews with young persons conducted during the first ten years of the Reform era, which showed a “loss of confidence” as “the door swung open” and Chinese young people became aware of Western culture. According to Croll, this uncertainty created a visible gap into which images and “things Western” could conveniently step with a seduction enhanced by their former prohibition. Entire lifestyles came to center on goods featured in imported Western magazines, television series, or soap operas, and “there was a pivotal rush by the urban and the young to become Western, global, and cosmopolitan”.

Jia’s films depict both the spread and the aftermath of this phenomenon. His films are filled with not only the material goods of global consumerism, but the invasion of Western media and popular entertainment into people’s everyday lives. In *Xiao Wu*, for example, he illustrates the unavoidable and ever-present influence of media through an endless cacophony of electronics, televisions, loud speakers, and cars that flood the soundtrack of the film. The seemingly ubiquitous presence of FYTV, in particular, and its legitimizing power speaks to the ways in which local media culture has infiltrated the people’s lives. *Unknown Pleasures* features a similar barrage of noise; a diegetic sound fills the background of almost every scene, including music performances, music videos, traffic or motorcycle noises. According to *Film Comment* editor Kent Jones, this non-stop soundtrack has multiple effects, both counter-balancing the rhythms

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162 Croll, 28-29.
of Fenyang (and Datong) street life, and underscoring the fact that this is an entertainment-obsessed society.\textsuperscript{163}

Jia also plays with sound in combination with film conventions. After Xiao Wu’s first interaction with Mei Mei, he stands at an angle overlooking the road, watching a fellow thief walk down the street with his girlfriend. As the camera follows the couple walking, it cuts in to a shot from Xiao Wu’s perspective. As Xiao Wu watches the couple, the soundtrack from a romantic television program plays in the background. The soundtrack’s ambiguous source and the use of the point-of-view shot encourages the audience to conclude that the television soundtrack is what plays through his own mind. Jia reminds us here that the only way Xiao Wu knows how to process and understand this romantic relationship between two real-life people is through the filter of media. Because television programs and KTV are so ubiquitous in contemporary China, Xiao Wu is no longer able to process and value this relationship on the street without the aid of media and popular culture. His head is filled with an endless soundtrack of media broadcasts and advertisements, symbolizing popular culture’s domination of even his most basic thought processes.

The relationship between Bin Bin and his mother serves as another example of the invasion of electronics and global media into the home; having long deceived his mother from the knowledge of his unemployment, Bin Bin finally appeases his mother’s wish for him to volunteer for the People’s Liberation Army. Bin Bin’s prolonged stubbornness towards his mother’s maternal insistence, however, has become synonymous with their relationship. At the moment Bin Bin yields, the narrative shifts its focus from dialogue

\textsuperscript{163} Jones, Kent. “Unknown Pleasures, A Hunting Study of Dead-End Youth in a Rapidly Changing World, Confirms China’s Jia Zhangke as a Master of Modern Alienation” Film Comment 38, no. 5 (2002), 45.
exchanges to the inertia of the domestic mise-en-scène. In a deep focus shot of their cluttered living-room, a television set relays the muffled voice of U.S. Secretary of State, Colin Powell, emerging from a news bulletin.

Edwin Mak suggests this scene can be read as a satire of those in service to a maternal nation; that loyalty to China’s ambitions means a willingness to embrace its demands, one that desires cooperation with the flows of global capitalism and other potential risks.164 A more general analysis of this scene and others between Bin Bin and his mother, however, can conclude that the central theme of these scenes is the invasion of electronics into their lives, which provides an additional barrier to inter-family communication. Out of the five scenes which Bin Bin and his mother share, three feature a television prominently in the shot and have soundtracks saturated by a stream of news broadcasts and commercials.

The breakdown of communication between characters in Platform members further represents the effects of such rapid cultural changes. In the beginning of the film, Mingliang’s house is full of chatter between his mother, he and his brothers. In the last scene he shares with his mother, however, when she tells Mingliang to accept the fact that his father has left, a television sits between the two, blaring loudly. This scene is typical of all the later scenes Mingliang shares with his mother: involving little dialogue, they are instead only filled with the cacophonous sound of a television in the background.

This also serves an example of the startling rapidity that people from even smaller, more rural cities were able to obtain personal electronics and other symbols of modernization; early in the film, Ruijian and Mingliang go to the labor union and join a

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large group of people to cram together to watch a film on a single small television set.

Only a few years later, however, Mingliang finds that his mother’s and most other homes in Fenyang all have their own televisions. This illustrates one of Liu Kang’s main ideas, the fact that the influence of Western consumer culture on Chinese society has occurred at the level of everyday life.\textsuperscript{165} This scene also depicts the realities of modernization: according to Jia, while it seemed as if China was opening up and there was a promise of a new life with new technologies, economic development and the coming of consumer electronics actually caused people to become “even lonelier and more alienated”.\textsuperscript{166}

Jia also alludes to the re-integration and commodification of ideas and symbols into contemporary Chinese society that traditionally held great cultural value. This trend can be seen, for instance, in the recent rehabilitation of Confucianism, which Croll argues was primarily inspired not by a return to traditional moral or value systems, but by everyday commodification of personal relations. Croll notes that references to Confucian terms, ideals, and themes now appears everywhere, from sayings on the backs of Beijing taxis to themes of Chinese fashion designers.\textsuperscript{167} In \textit{Unknown Pleasures}, there is a running theme in which Bin Bin and Xiao Ji consistently refer to the Sun Wukong, the Monkey King. Classical stories like that of Sun Wukong have historically been referenced by Chinese leaders or writers due to their reinforcement of traditional values; the story of the Monkey King itself has been referenced in material ranging from the Beijing Opera to Chairman Mao’s speeches. Today, however, the image of the Monkey king is used in everything from advertisements to video games; Bin Bin and his girlfriend watch the

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item[165] Liu, 103.
\item[167] Croll, 37.
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cartoon story of the Monkey King on television. Jia uses this to demonstrate that this legend has been re-integrated into post-modern society in a way that, similar to the re-integration of Confucianism, no longer values its moral message or reinforcement of value systems—it is instead linked to consumerism and pop culture.

In one of his references, Bin Bin explicitly draws the point that unlike himself, the Monkey King has no parents and no burdens. Jia cites this reference, explaining that the story of the Monkey King reflects the fatalism of Unknown Pleasures in that unlike the Monkey King, his characters "struggle desperately. They pull themselves out of difficult situations, but they always fall back into new problems because no one can escape the rules of the game—true freedom doesn’t exist in this world".168

It is because of this lack of freedom, in addition to pessimistic views regarding their lack of prospects and true status in society, that youth in Jia’s films take advantage of popular culture as a means of temporary escape from or denial of the real world. For Xiao Ji and Bin Bin, this escape is embodied in their continuous posturing and mimicking of Western poses, gestures, and dialogue. Xiao Ji, for instance, again references the Monkey King as he brushes off Qiao San’s death by saying, “Who gives a shit about him? I’m the great Monkey King”. With this gesture he puts on a facade, utilizing the story of the Monkey King not to demonstrate a moral lesson, but to hide his own insecurities: the fear he had of Qiao San’s power in society as an entrepreneurial force.

Xiao Ji also cloaks his insecurities and feelings of alienation through his constant mimicking of Western movies and tough guy characters. Similar to the adoption of blue jeans, cosmetics, and hairstyles, the lifestyles in these Western movies appeal to Jia’s

young protagonists; they are constantly lighting and smoking cigarettes, and Xiao Ji often imagines and hypothesizes what it would be like if he and Bin Bin were “American millionaires”. He later jokes with Qiao Qiao that, if he had been born in a rich country like the U.S., he’d rob a bank. Jia follows this reference with a suitable ironic-homage to *Pulp Fiction*, in which his character, camera, music and editing all imitate one of the film’s famous scenes, blurring the line between Xiao Ji’s fantasies and the style of the film itself.\(^{169}\) Jia addresses his reflexive nod to Hollywood cinema and its influences, noting that globalization in China has “a connotative of Americanization, which has been translated into a ridiculous attempt to imitate Hollywood in Chinese cinema”\(^ {170}\).

The fantasies they use to escape eventually collide with their real world, however, when, inspired by movies they have seen of bank robbers, they decide to rob a bank using a fake bomb. Bin Bin is immediately caught by the police, and Xiao Ji drives off on his motorcycle, in a single shot which lasts over three minutes. The length of this last take reinforces the fact that Xiao Ji, in his real life, now has no direction to go and no future, he is just driving aimlessly. Critic Herwan Iguinen sums up the effect of this posturing and yearning to escape the real world, explaining that the protagonists’ poses are “superimposed on the real”. This posing has no deeper meaning, yet it “intensifies with a deadpan irony.” He notes that it is this pop tendency which gives the long sequence shots in the film their meaning and “elevates certain scenes from the narrative while remaining inextricably linked to it”.

Xiao Wu, because he is ostracized and alienated by former friends and by the larger community, also uses pop culture as a means to escape the real world. For him, this

\(^{169}\) Jones, 47.
means going to the KTV, a perfect example of one of the ways in which Jia depicts the city Fenyang’s modernization and the impact the forces of commodification have on people there.\textsuperscript{171} As cities in China began modernizing in the 1980s and 1990s, international popular culture began streaming into the country in the form of movies, television shows, Western bars, and KTVs. In the early 1990s, going to KTVs became an extremely popular activity among Chinese college students and working people in their twenties, particularly in urban city centers.\textsuperscript{172} Further, according to many young people in China, going to a KTV serves as a good psychological release, helping them reduce the pressure they face in everyday life.\textsuperscript{173} Indeed, according to Jia, in the cold and difficult environment created by modern society, KTVs provide Chinese youth “a place to come home to, a means of self-comfort”.\textsuperscript{174} Xiao Wu goes to the KTV because it can provide him an escape from the pain and loneliness his ostracized position in the community brings him.

Western popular culture has influenced Chinese youth in many ways, bringing with it not only music and fashion in the form of KTV’s and bell-bottom pants, but ideas, both liberating and oppressive. In a interview discussing his own coming of age period during the 1980s, Jia said that it was only with the influence of Western thought and philosophy that people’s minds were “liberated” and that they began paying attention to themselves as individuals, referencing the work of Freud, Nietzsche, and Schopenhauer. This notion of the Westernized individual essence of free will and biological nature,
however, collides with several essential characteristics of Chinese society. According to Jia, while it let young people understand themselves, it also brought with it a kind of loneliness and desperation. Yan Yunxiang explores this transformation in his study of the change taking place during the Reform period in rural Chinese village societies. He notes that the moral communities of villages became increasingly irrelevant in the 1990s, “ineffectual against those who flouted traditions in pursuit of their individual interests”.

Jia depicts the presence of this newly-formed individualism in his protagonists’ daily lives and actions. In Xiao Wu, for instance, the motif of singing contemporary pop songs appears several times throughout the film. The majority of the time, however, it is one person singing alone: every time Mei Mei sings for Xiao Wu, in the KTV and again in her dorm, Xiao Wu refuses to sing with her. The audience first hears Xiao Wu sing while he is bathing alone in an empty bathhouse. The long shot used and the echoing of his voice emphasize how small and alone he is in the cavernous space, which is normally full of loud, chatting people. According to Jia, pop songs which only began streaming into China in the late 1980s, first from Hong Kong and Taiwan and then from the West, differed from previous music which always highlighted the collective. Songs from pop singers like Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng were always about the individual, which “suddenly infected [young people] with [a] very personal world”. This motif again illustrates the conflict of individualism, which is an essential component of Western

culture, with traditional Chinese society: Xiao Wu and Mei Mei sing alone, which represents their new roles as individuals who only have themselves and these pop songs as sources of support and comfort. It also illustrates the role popular music plays in young people’s formation of identity.

In *Unknown Pleasures*, Bin Bin is also featured singing alone; after his arrest, the station officer first interrogates Bin Bin then orders him to stand up and sing a song. The song he chooses is “Ren Xiaoyao”, the name of a pop song from 2001 from which the film takes its name.\(^\text{179}\) Touting the idea of “unrestrained” or “unlimited freedom,” it appears multiple times in the film, serving as a motif which is ironically juxtaposed to the actual imprisonment Jia’s characters face in society. The song’s music video, for instance, plays on the television as Bin Bin’s girlfriend informs him they cannot see each other while she studies for exams, hoping to enter a university in Beijing. His outlet for self-expression manifests itself in their singing; as they ironically sing about a love that will last forever, their words unknowingly foreshadow their future separation with Yuan Yuan’s departure for Beijing.

The song seems to almost mock the position the film’s protagonists find themselves in throughout the film; although they sing about “unlimited freedom,” they are constantly constrained by financial needs and by traditional family and social structures. In the final scene when Bin Bin is imprisoned, he again, ironically, chooses to sing the song “Ren Xiaoyao.” Cui Shuqin suggests that this self-reflexive audiovisual

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metaphor demonstrates that the body may be restrained, yet the music allows the protagonist a final expression of resistance and free will.\textsuperscript{180}

Nonetheless, his pathetic isolation within the shot and the lone sound of only his voice with (a rare occurrence of) no background noise or music does not evoke a feeling of hope or struggle, but rather illustrates the illusory nature of this artificial idea of resistance. Jia addresses this illusion, saying that “the younger generation [is] faced with a new kind of cultural oppression,” which is due in part to “the lifestyles they hear and learn about through the media”.\textsuperscript{181}

In \textit{Platform}, Jia again uses music as a motif, conceptualizing his narrative themes in relation to the popular song by Liu Hong, “Zhantai” (platform), from which Jia again took his film’s title. Each time the song is heard throughout the film, it suggests a different connotation, and the original version is altered as the film narrative progresses. The second time the song appears, for example, Cui Mingliang plays a rock-and-roll version with a sped-up rhythm – the handful of rural audience members respond by throwing trash at him. Near the end of the film, the song allows the protagonists to express a sense of longing and loss; the lyrics themselves underscore the reality of the characters’ final situation. One line of the song, for instance, reads, “waiting alone at the

\textsuperscript{181} Jia, 193.
platform without knowing the destination.” Here, Jia uses an audiovisual mode to reveal the disillusionment of youth caught between the local and the global. He explains that while the song is about love, it also expressed the feelings of many people in the Eighties, who were all “very optimistic” and “full of hope for the future”. The platforms of the makeshift rural stages on which they perform their own versions of the songs and genres they are encountering for the first time symbolize their attempt to step into, and become active participants in, world culture. Jia explains that “a platform is a place where you start a journey, it’s also a place where you finish a journey; this is the fate of the characters…they end up where they started”.

Mei Mei, who works at the KTV, also represents the hopes and illusions that popular culture has instilled into contemporary youth culture. Like Xiao Wu, Mei Mei is in her twenties and has grown up surrounded by pop culture. This means that she has been surrounded from an early age by the images of famous pop singers in China, whose advertisements, concerts, and movies are omnipresent on Chinese television and in Chinese theaters. This wave of influence, however, has given her, like so many other young Chinese women, unrealistic dreams of becoming a famous performer. Consequently, she has ended up working in a KTV, most likely engaged in prostitution, which is what many KTVs in China serve as a front for. As a prostitute, she too, like Xiao Wu, is ostracized from society, and singing in the KTV offers her a similar escape from the harsh reality of her situation. She is representative of many young Chinese

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today, who say that singing at a KTV with people as their audience allows them to feel as if they are pop stars.\textsuperscript{185} Jia, however, bathes all the film’s KTV scenes in a red light. This red light has a specific connotation in China; while many establishments appear to be KTVs or hair salons, those lit with red light are often actually outlets for prostitution.

The heavy red lighting which overwhelms Mei Mei’s scenes serves as a constant reminder to the audience of the fantasies she entertains while singing in this KTV, and what sad reality they cover up. She even carries this performance into her interactions with family; when calling her mother, she lies saying she has job prospects with a successful movie director.

For Xiao Wu, Mei Mei’s KTV serves as not only an escape from reality, but also as a means of communication, which is a key part to developing the inter-personal relationships so vital to traditional Chinese society. Xiao Wu’s difficulty in expressing his feelings in normal social contexts, on the street or in daily conversations, is evident in the actor Wang Hongwei’s expressive physical movements. His head is often tilted down, and his body literally writhes, expressing the tortured inner feelings of sadness, anger, and discomfort that he is unable to voice.\textsuperscript{186}

\textsuperscript{186} Jones, 45.
Xiao Wu’s visible struggle represents the larger cultural struggle which serves as a major theme in all of these films: the pull of individualism versus the community-centered nature of traditional Chinese culture. Jia places these youth coming of age in the middle of this conflict, being pulled by familial obligations, social influence, and by the lure of popular culture and media. It therefore affects the lives of characters like Xiao Wu, complicating, in particular, every aspect of interpersonal relationships.

Jia further references this struggle through his choice of setting. Xiao Wu’s character, for example, because he is extremely shy and could never approach Mei Mei on the street or through direct conversation, has most of his meetings and interactions with Mei Mei within the KTV. They interact by staring at a television, singing the words that appear on the screen. Because he does not have to initiate conversation or fully hold Mei Mei’s attention, this technological medium therefore serves as Xiao Wu’s crutch to combat his shyness and lack of communication skills. By situating Xiao Wu and Mei Mei’s relationship in this context, Jia illustrates that aspects of modern China’s popular culture like KTVs not only help young people like Xiao Wu but also hinder them, allowing them to avoid learning how to communicate confidently and independently with other members of society, an aspect of modern culture which has directly affected the nature of romantic relationships such as theirs. Jin Liu adds that popular songs serve an empathetic function for Jia’s silent protagonist, referencing Xiao Wu’s repeated use of the song “xin yu” (heart rain), which features a musical dialogue between man and his love, who will “become someone else’s bride tomorrow”.

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187 Jones, 44.
Serving to foreshadow then reinforce the ephemerality of contemporary relationships like that of Xiao Wu and Mei Mei, it heightens audience empathy towards a silent protagonist whom is largely helpless to express his protest or outrage.

In *Unknown Pleasures*, Bin Bin, similar to Xiao Wu, also embodies the alienation and lack of communication skills that symbolize those developing youth of his generation. When Yuan Yuan suggests that they not see each other while she studies for exams, he meekly agrees, although he is obviously very upset by it. The only way characters in both films are able to communicate their feelings, however, is by holding hands with their partner, staring at the television, and singing along to the words on the screen.

Jia explains that “the Chinese way of managing [dramatic moments] is to restrain anything dramatic happening…it’s our way of crisis management in human relationships”. 189

According to Cui Shuqin, pop music not only signifies characters’ inner depth and emotion, but can be gender specific; moreover, it enhances visual movement and spectacle. In *Platform*, for instance, the female protagonist Ruijuan performs a solo dance to the melody of the song “Yes or No,” expressing anxiety about her unsettled relationship with Cui Mingliang. The song bleeds over into the next scene, becoming

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189 Jia, 59.
nondiegetic, as the film cross-cuts between Ruijuan on her motorcycle and Cui Mingliang, traveling with the performance troupe to another venue. The soundtrack frames a private space where the female character expresses her private emotions; the melody and the dance choreography create an atmosphere where female voice and desire are heard and seen, but importantly are expressed through the only outlet available to her, music and dance. Although the lovers are physically apart, the music also underscores their psychological connection, reinforcing its entry into every facet of these young protagonists’ relationship.

In *Unknown Pleasures*, Qiao Qiao performs a similarly expressive dance after her boyfriend Qiao San, who has learned of her relations with Xiao Ji, roughs her up and refuses to let her leave. Similar to Ruijian, her style of dancing starkly contrasts with the contemporary dancing featured in previous scenes of the film. Up until this point, she has only been shown dancing in disco clubs or to fast pop music, but in this scene she performs drawn-out, precise movements to a slow Mongolian song, wearing a traditional costume without one of her usual wigs. This traditional dance, performed in a Mongolian-style traditional costume and to music of a Mongolian singer, is also ironic because it is part of a promotion program for Mongolian King Liquor; here, Jia slyly illustrates the collision, again, between local setting and global commercialism.

Wu Dingbo points out that critics and academia often look down upon popular culture, viewing it as “a hotbed of poisonous weeds due to its commercial character” and an element which “endangers the creation of an elite culture”.

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190 Cui, 120.
191 Wu, 8.
the individual development and viewpoints of the low, most marginalized groups in society: entertainers, criminals, and young people.

Further, they play with the stylistic and thematic characteristics of the Bildungsroman, representing a larger level of conflict between Western ideas and Chinese traditional culture playing out between friends, loved ones, and within the home. His interplay between society and the individual again illustrates the damage to inter-personal relationships, value systems, and communication caused by the invasion of consumerism and popular culture into Chinese daily life.

In their compilation on Chinese popular culture and thought, Ling, Madsen, and Pickowicz reference the demonstrations of 1989, asking why, despite an undeniable rise in their material standard of living during the past decade, Chinese students and workers were so profoundly discontent. Through his careful examination of the effects popular culture has had on lives of his young protagonists, Jia therefore attempts to depict this “profound discontent” and pose answers to the defining question of his generation.

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Conclusion

Through his first three films, Jia Zhangke establishes related themes, story structures, and characters in order to document the human effects of large-scale political, economic, and cultural change. Using these tools, he paints the portraits of individual youth, whose overlooked experiences coming of age are emblematic of the larger problems confronting a society facing rapid economic reform and the effects of globalism.

Corresponding to their interrelated themes, characters, and style, these films roughly connect chronologically. In Xiao Wu, the journey of a young man illustrates the effects of the overwhelming barrage of changes occurring in Chinese society at the peak of its new state of economic development in the early 1990s. Although there is no continuity of story between the films, Xiao Wu serves as an extension of the historical timeline and topographical matching sketched out in Platform. Viewed as a prequel, Platform displays the roots and development of the social malaise gripping the world of Xiao Wu and his friends. Finally, in Unknown Pleasures, the plight of the lost youth embodied in Xiao Wu is expanded through Jia’s portraits of young Bin Bin and Xiao Yong. Their inability to successfully find jobs and fulfill their media-inspired pipe dreams of success has driven them to not only a state of alienation and hopelessness, but to a state of illusion, driving them to turn towards crime and fatalism. We can find further evidence of this link in Jia’s original intention for Platform, which was to make the film span two decades, not one, from 1979-1999; Unknown Pleasures, by extension, is set in the early 2000s.\(^{193}\)

\(^{193}\) Jia Zhangke, interview with Jiang Yuanlun and Shi Jian, Xianfeng, Duihua, 48.
Corresponding to this chronological link, the historical extension of *Platform’s* philosophy of alienation and cultural change during the 1990s can be seen in both *Xiao Wu* and in *Unknown Pleasures*. Two decades after the promise of a brighter future, Jia paints a generation of young friends whose stories both end with betrayals: in *Xiao Wu*, our protagonist is betrayed by Xiaoyong, and in *Unknown Pleasures*, Binbin is abandoned by Xiao Ji. In both circumstances, the nation is caught in the throes of sweeping reforms that leaves these young protagonists behind.

These two examples are part of Jia’s overall emphasis on the devastating change that has taken place among inter-personal relationships in contemporary China. In *Xiao Wu*, this change is carefully documented through Xiao Wu’s interactions with his old friend Xiaoyong, his love interest Mei Mei, and his family, culminating in a devastating portrait of his alienation from the community as a whole. In *Platform*, we also follow the paths of two young couple’s relationships, in addition to tracing the fundamental multi-generational dynamics between Cui Mingliang’s family members. In *Unknown Pleasures*, Jia combines and utilizes all of these relationship types together, including the romantic relationships of two young couples, the relationships between multiple generations within the family, and the relationships between young male friends.

Jia’s heavy emphasis on the effects global popular culture has on interpersonal relationships again represents a larger cultural struggle in China: the pull of individualism versus the community-centered nature of traditional Chinese culture. Jia places these youth coming of age in the middle of this conflict, illustrating how the clash complicates interpersonal relationships between both family members, friends, and lovers.
In all of these relationships, Jia documents some other causes of this fundamental change by highlighting the change in young people’s moral codes and value systems and the invasive presence of media and pop culture in people’s lives and homes. For both Xiao Wu and Xiao Ji, economic incentive proves to be a major obstacle to their romantic relationships, and in *Platform*, it is the excessive modernity and economy of the relationship between Zhang Jun and Zhong Ping which leads to their sudden separation. Similar to *Xiao Wu*, a clash of modern ideas with traditional value systems proves to be detrimental to the young protagonists; the invasion of consumer goods, electronics, and global popular culture into the home further symbolizes the corruption and implosion of traditional family value systems.

For the protagonists in all films, the changing of their daily surroundings parallels this change in social codes and value systems. *Xiao Wu* creates an environment filled with construction work, “demolish” signs, and torn-down buildings, which is carried through the next two films as a prominent theme. Physical structures are disassembled and destabilized before the protagonists can even comprehend the changes, let alone regain their bearings. This rapid environmental change parallels and embodies the breakdown of social values that the protagonists confront firsthand.

The development of these young protagonists’ lives and relationships plays out through the structure of the Bildungsroman, which serves as both a standard template Jia varies in order to convey a uniquely Chinese perspective, and as a larger allegory to the plight of the country as a whole. Jia utilizes the universality of the coming of age story a new way, to highlight the specific social issues plaguing post-modern China. When
explaining why he ultimately decided to exclude the details of how one of his characters in *Platform* reaches her final outcome, Jia says:

> It struck me that anyone would understand the life journey of a girl or boy…living in a provincial city like that. There was no need to explain all those details, they simply weren’t important.\(^{194}\)

As Michael Berry notes, in these three films Jia has taken an essentially unknown backwater like Fenyang and transformed it into a site emblematic of all China; similarly, the journey of the individual youth who populate Jia’s films are emblematic of an entire generation in China.\(^{195}\) This generation embodies the marginalized peoples whose relationships, moral value systems, and everyday communication have all changed during the growth of the Chinese economy and of globalization. Unlike the Chinese economy, however, Jia’s protagonists do not fulfill their dreams and mature into successful, prosperous adults, but rather end up in states of alienation, disillusionment, and exile.

Further, in all three films Jia not only follows his protagonists’ coming of age, from youth and optimism to a state of disillusioned adulthood, but he links this journey to that of the country and economy: their journey towards a state of modernity. While this link is most apparent in the allegory of the train presented in *Platform*, it can also be found in *Xiao Wu* and *Unknown Pleasures*. Xiao Wu, Xiao Ji, and Bin Bin, for example, through their ultimate alienation, disillusionment, failure to achieve their goals, and even arrest, provide a firsthand example that the maturation of the Chinese economy is shown to be at odds with the successful maturation and assimilation of its youth.

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While accommodating the conventional, accepted Bildungsroman genre conventions to make these representations, however, Jia’s films also deny the viewer access to character subjectivity, including long shots and long takes, deep focus, and mise-en-scène framing devices and character placement. Jia’s protagonists’ coming of age processes are distinct due to their placement within a Chinese setting, which tends to value the importance of society over the individual, so by downplaying the individualism which is a characteristic of many Western narratives, Jia’s coloring of the genre therefore plays with the pull between individualism and Chinese traditional social relations, which further reflects the conflict between Western ideas and Chinese traditional culture.

These three films are connected not only in their use of the Bildungsroman, but also in terms of their shared aesthetic vision. All three are dominated by long takes and an uncommonly large amount of long shots, and all feature soundtracks dominated by an endless cacophony of electronics, televisions, loud speakers, cars, and music videos that flood the soundtracks, illustration the ways in which media culture has infiltrated people’s lives. Naturalistic acting styles, improvisation, and a scattered use of non-professional actors is also consistent through all three films, adding the presence of a firm documentary aesthetic.

One can, however, also see a distinct development and refinement of his techniques from film to film. In Xiao Wu, access to character psychology is subverted and replaced by Jia’s consistent use of long shots and framing devices within the mise-en-scene. In Platform, many of these techniques are amplified, featuring more extreme long shots and a grander use of framing and staging, augmented by the presence of an actual stage. These techniques pre-empt the self-aware performative nature of characters in
*Unknown Pleasures* like the dancer Qiao Qiao and posers Bin Bin and Xiao Ji. This addition of dramatization also provides a new way to augment the denied access to character psychology. Popular culture also plays an even more prominent role, spilling into self-reflexive filming techniques and music taken directly from Western films.

Through all three films, Jia positions the coming-of-age story as a fundamental narrative of modernity in China, depicting an alienating, media and illusion-dominated world, filling its coming of age youth with hopes and unrealistic expectations. The upheaval of traditional community relationships and of moral value systems is reflected in Jia’s filming style, as is the alienation and radically altered viewpoint of his characters. Their maturing into states of disillusionment parallels the maturing of the nation and of society, which has lost traditional family value systems while gaining new economic growth. With this growth, however, comes a set of new entrepreneurs and moral values which leaves many behind; for this new generation just beginning to come of age, Jia shows us that the exactness of this loss is only beginning to be realized.
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