

Jia Zhangke: Film is a Form of Nostalgia

Yuan Zhang^{1,*} and Siti Aishah binti Hj Mohammad Razi¹

¹ Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia, (UPM) Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

* Correspondence author: 15935818807@163.com

Abstract: Since his emergence in the late 1990s, Jia Zhangke has employed a calm yet emotionally charged cinematic style to chronicle the transformations of Chinese society amid globalization, gradually shaping a distinctive “cinema of nostalgia.” This paper draws upon Svetlana Boym’s dichotomy of “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia, alongside Fred Davis’s sociological account of nostalgia and social change, to analyze Jia’s filmmaking trajectory. It examines four key dimensions—narrative themes, visual aesthetics, media technology, and historical consciousness—to reveal how Jia transforms personal memory into collective emotion and historical archive. Beginning with the “Shanxi Hometown Trilogy” (1997–2002) and extending to his latest feature *Caught by the Tides* (2024), the study highlights Jia’s reflective nostalgia as a lens for dissecting spatial, temporal, and identity ruptures. Ultimately, it situates Jia’s work within the historiography of contemporary Chinese cinema.

Keywords: Jia Zhangke; nostalgia; reflective nostalgia; locality; film aesthetics

1. Introduction: Between Rupture and Connection

Cinema, often described as a time machine, has a unique capacity to capture, suspend, and reconstruct memory. In the context of China’s accelerated modernization, where physical landscapes and social values undergo relentless reshaping, the need to document vanishing worlds becomes not only artistic but also historical. Among contemporary filmmakers, Jia Zhangke stands out as an auteur whose works function as both affective maps and anthropological records of a disappearing China. His camera lingers on demolished neighborhoods, dislocated bodies, and fading dialects—elements that are often excluded from dominant national narratives.

Originally a medical term, “nostalgia” has become a crucial metaphor for the modern experience. Rapid mobility and media revolutions have transformed the homeland from a geographical coordinate into an affective structure, while cinema—especially digital imagery—has become a natural vessel for storing, representing, and imagining home. Jia Zhangke translates his personal memories of Fenyang into a universal symptom of modernity, elevating nostalgia from private yearning to an aesthetic and political rhetoric. Existing scholarship has productively approached Jia Zhangke’s cinema through fragmentation, nostalgia, and memory politics, but has paid less sustained attention to nostalgia as a psychosocial response to accelerated change and displacement [1].

Against this backdrop, the present study asks: (1) how does Jia’s cinema mobilize nostalgia to register ruptures in space, time, and identity under modernization? (2) what psychological and social functions does nostalgia perform in his films—especially in relation to collective emotion and shared memory? (3) how do changing media forms and digital images reshape the ways “home” is stored, recalled, and re-imagined on screen?

To address these questions, the analysis draws on Svetlana Boym’s (2001) distinction between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia [2], alongside Fred Davis’s (1979) account of nostalgia and social change [3]. It examines four dimensions—narrative themes, visual aesthetics, media technology, and historical consciousness—across Jia’s work from the “Shanxi Hometown Trilogy” (1997–2002) to *Caught by the Tides* (2024), and it proceeds through a qualitative, text-centered reading whose method and selection logic are specified in the following section.



2. Theoretical Framework

Nostalgia, a term originally coined in the late seventeenth century to describe a pathological longing for home, has evolved into a complex cultural and psychological concept. Svetlana Boym's seminal study *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) offers a crucial theoretical framework by distinguishing between two modes: restorative nostalgia, which attempts to reconstruct a lost home, and reflective nostalgia, which dwells in the longing and loss without seeking to rebuild the past [2].

Fred Davis, in *Nostalgia: A Sociological Perspective* (1979), emphasizes nostalgia as a response to discontinuity in individual or collective life [3]. He argues that nostalgia becomes more pronounced during periods of rapid social change, serving both as a coping mechanism and a strategy for identity negotiation [3]. For Davis, nostalgia is not mere sentimentality but a narrative process through which individuals make sense of the present by selectively reconstructing the past.

Nostalgia as a psychosocial mechanism. Building on Davis's emphasis on discontinuity, nostalgia can be approached as a psychosocial response to accelerated change: it helps sustain a sense of identity continuity, preserves meaning when familiar social worlds dissolve, and reaffirms social connectedness through shared references to "home" and the past. In cinema, these functions operate on two linked levels. For characters, nostalgia may appear as an affective orientation that organizes loss, displacement, and belonging into narratable experience; for audiences, nostalgia can provide a medium through which private memories become socially legible, enabling recognition, alignment, and shared emotion. Importantly, nostalgia also exceeds the individual: repeated images, sounds, and vernacular details can sediment into collective memory, and cinematic revisitations of loss may contribute to the intergenerational transmission of historical experience—especially where modernization produces visible ruptures in place, work, and everyday life.

Building upon these foundations, this article treats Jia Zhangke's films as a manifestation of reflective nostalgia, which does not idealize the past but critically engages with memory and history. Jia's aesthetic choices—such as long takes, temporal disjunctions, and quasi-documentary techniques—align with what Boym terms the reflective mode, acknowledging the irreversibility of loss while probing its socio-political origins [2].

Operationalizing the four analytic dimensions. To translate the above framework into a workable reading strategy, the analysis proceeds through four dimensions: (1) narrative themes, referring to recurring story problems (e.g., mobility, separation, return) and how plots organize rupture and continuity; the primary evidence includes character arcs, dialogue, and narrative structure. (2) visual aesthetics, referring to framing, duration, and spatial composition that register absence, erosion, and the feel of lived environments; evidence includes shot scale, long takes, camera movement, and *mise-en-scène*. (3) media technology, referring to shifts in image formats and the use of digital/archival materials that reshape what can be recorded and recalled as "home"; evidence includes texture, intermedial inserts, and documentary-fiction boundary work. (4) historical consciousness, referring to how films position personal time within larger social time (transition, reform, aftermath) and how memory is staged as historical experience; evidence includes temporal ordering, voiceover or on-screen markers, and the recurrence of motifs that invite collective recognition.

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, text-based method which roots itself in close film reading. Instead of regarding nostalgia as a fixed theme to be "discovered," this analysis tracks how nostalgia gets generated via narrative arrangement, audiovisual configuration, and media operation. The analytical framework possesses interpretive nature yet has structured features: it regards cinematic details as proof for the way rupture, continuity, and "home" gain understandability under condition of rapid social change.

Materials and sampling. The research corpus covers Jia Zhangke's works from the "Shanxi Hometown Trilogy" 1997–2002 to *Caught by the Tides* 2024. The selection of films follows a time-point principle: the selected works are seen as representative spots on a development path where Jia's attention to place, mobility, and historical transition becomes more and more obvious, while media forms and production backgrounds also change across different time periods. This long-time scope enables the research to compare early films focused on hometown with later works shaped by large-scale population displacement, urban reconstruction, and wider spread of digital and archival images. The section divisions used in the analysis are therefore based on clusters of works defined by production period and dominant spatial-historical concerns, rather than on Jia Zhangke's biological age or a rigid career-stage model.

Analytic procedure. The reading activity carries out along four aspects presented in the theoretical framework. (1) Narrative themes are tracked via plot structure, character development paths, dialogue,

and repeated scenarios of leaving, coming back, separation, and adaptation. (2) Visual aesthetic features are inspected through shot length, frame setting, spatial arrangement, camera movement, and the treatment of constructed spaces and daily objects. (3) Media technology is analyzed by paying attention to image texture, format changes, and the application of digital recording, documentary-fiction boundary operation, or archival materials when such things exist. (4) Historical awareness is evaluated through time arrangement, switches between past and present, on-screen signs, and symbolic elements that place personal time inside larger social time. Observation notes are arranged according to each film first and then re-classified by each aspect, which makes cross-film comparison possible within every analytical direction. Credibility and interpretive control. Because this article advances claims not only about formal patterning but also about the social legibility of nostalgia, close reading is supplemented by limited triangulation at points where interpretation extends beyond immediately observable film form. Three kinds of ancillary materials are used for this purpose: Jia Zhangke's published reflections on filmmaking, program notes or festival introductions accompanying the circulation of the films, and a small number of representative critical responses, especially for works that have already generated substantial discussion. These materials do not determine the interpretation and are not treated as audience data; they are used only to test whether a reading is textually plausible, historically situated, and publicly legible. In practice, triangulation is applied selectively in three situations: when recurring local details are read as markers of hometown memory, when documentary-fiction hybridity is interpreted as a mode of collective remembrance, and when archival re-editing is discussed as a historically self-conscious form of nostalgia. The films remain the primary evidence throughout. Paratextual materials are cited only where they enter the discussion and serve as contextual corroboration rather than proof. This bounded procedure reduces overdependence on a single interpretive voice while keeping the article within the scope of text-centered film analysis.

4. Nostalgic Narratives in Jia's Film

4.1. *The Hometown Trilogy: Locality and Modernization in Conflict*

Xiao Wu (1997), *Platform* (2000), and *Unknown Pleasures* (2002) trace the transformation of China's small-town life at the turn of the millennium. Through recurring details—bootleg cassette tapes, underground discos, and county-seat taxis—Jia preserves a vanishing everyday world and registers the pressure of transient modernity on local identity. These films depict lives suspended between mobility and inertia, where trains, platforms, and desolate public squares symbolize the tensions of departure and return, desire and disillusionment, hope and stasis.

Jia's use of static long takes invites contemplation rather than narrative propulsion, enabling the viewer to inhabit time alongside the characters. His restrained framing often situates subjects within decaying architectural backdrops, juxtaposing the personal and historical. Non-professional actors and natural lighting further reinforce the documentary-like realism, while the regional dialects spoken by characters root the films firmly in Shanxi's cultural geography.

In *Platform*, for instance, the protagonists' transition from socialist-era stage performance to commercial pop culture is shown not through dramatic transformation but through gradual shifts in staging and costume, subtly tracing ideological and generational change. In *Xiao Wu*, the titular pickpocket becomes a metaphor for obsolescence, wandering a town that no longer accommodates his existence. The ambient soundtrack—snippets of street noise, distant announcements, low-volume radio—evokes a sense of detachment and transience, building a melancholic atmosphere.

These audiovisual choices coalesce into a visual style of nostalgia. Rather than romanticizing the past, Jia presents it as a ghostly residue haunting the present. The conflict between locality and modernization is not resolved; it is endured. Jia's retrospective remarks point in a similar direction. Read as context rather than proof, they suggest that dialect, minor objects, and everyday routines matter here not as nostalgic ornament, but as traces of ordinary life under historical pressure [4].

4.2. *Spatial Fragmentation and the Suturing of Memory: Urban-Industrial Transition, 2004–2008*

In *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), and *24 City* (2008), Jia Zhangke moves from the provincial intimacy of Shanxi toward urban space, demolition landscapes, and state-driven transformation, forming a distinct 2004–2008 cluster in which local observation opens onto a broader social horizon. These films capture the disorienting effects of China's hypermodernization through an aesthetic of spatial fragmentation and an unmoored sense of time. Displacement—both physical and emotional—becomes a dominant condition, with characters suspended in in-between zones: theme parks, demolition sites, high-rises under construction, and repurposed factories.

Jia's formal strategies intensify this sense of dislocation. Slow pans and lateral tracking shots emphasize horizontal movement across unstable terrain, while digital grain and color desaturation give the image a ghostly, impermanent quality. In *Still Life*, the city of Fengjie—soon to be submerged by the Three Gorges Dam—is framed through long-take composed scenes, where humans appear dwarfed by industrial ruins or drifting boats. The camera's slow gaze, often held longer than narrative function demands, invites viewers into a contemplative temporality that foregrounds the irreversibility of loss. This spatial language also provides a concrete bridge to the journal's environmental and social-psychological concerns.

Spatial erosion and psychosocial impacts. The recurring settings in these films—demolition sites, flooded or soon-to-be-flooded river towns, repurposed factories, and simulated “worlds” inside theme parks—do more than establish atmosphere. They foreground spatial erosion as an everyday condition: familiar places are dismantled, relocated, or rendered unrecognizable, while characters inhabit provisional spaces that rarely allow stable belonging. In *Still Life*, Fengjie is not simply a backdrop for individual stories; the impending submergence redefines the entire environment as temporary, turning streets, buildings, and routines into objects of imminent disappearance.

Seen through an environmental and social-psychological lens, such erosion implicates several intertwined effects. First, it weakens place attachment—the lived bond through which “home” becomes more than a coordinate—by repeatedly interrupting continuity between people and the spaces that anchor memory. Second, it produces the psychology of displacement: disorientation, reduced control, and a sense that everyday life is being reorganized by forces beyond one's reach, even when movement is gradual rather than sudden. Third, it invites environmental grief, a subdued mourning for the loss of places, communal routines, and local textures that cannot be recovered once the landscape is transformed. These psychosocial pressures help explain why nostalgia here remains reflective: longing is organized around witnessing irreversible change rather than restoring an intact home.

Meanwhile, Jia's increasing use of digital video introduces a new layer of temporal instability. In *24 City*, he blends staged monologues with real interviews, creating a documentary–fiction blend that questions the boundary between historical fact and mediated memory. Factory workers and office employees recall their lives inside a soon-to-be-demolished aerospace plant, their testimonies forming a collective elegy for an era. The camera here functions as a memory aid—helping stitch fractured personal recollections into a shared historical narrative. In this sense, spatial fragmentation is matched by a mediated attempt to hold experience together as memory. This interpretation also gains support from existing criticism on Jia's ruin imagery and memory politics. Discussions of demolition, residue, and mediated memory in Jia scholarship help confirm that the documentary-fiction texture of *24 City* is can be read as a way of organizing historical remembrance rather than as a merely stylistic experiment. Brought in only as a secondary check, this criticism strengthens the claim that spatial fragmentation in the mid-career works is tied to collective memory [5-6].

This 2004–2008 group enacts what Svetlana Boym calls reflective nostalgia: it does not attempt to recover a lost home, but instead dwells on absence, fracture, and transformation. Rather than offering closure, Jia's on-screen staging sustains contradiction: construction and erasure, progress and mourning coexist in the same frame.

4.3. Violence, Migration, and Archival Longing in the Later Works, 2013–2024

Violence and archival reflexivity become more explicit in Jia's later films, but migration is not newly introduced at this stage; it is a continuing thread whose scale and consequences become more pronounced. As the earlier discussion of *The World* (2004) and *Still Life* (2006) has already shown, Jia had long treated mobility, relocation, and unstable belonging as ordinary conditions of postsocialist change. In *A Touch of Sin* (2013), *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), that migratory logic widens from movement within rapidly changing urban China to separation across provinces and national borders. *Mountains May Depart* is especially revealing in this respect: by extending the map of movement to Australia, the film links intimate estrangement to the longer social history of China's urban transformation, in which rural-to-urban migration, regional labor circulation, and uneven development reshape family life, language continuity, and the meaning of home.

Across this later cluster, the pressures are concrete—capital mobility, coercive force, and migration across widening scales—and their consequences are not only social but psychological. Such pressures frequently translate into forms of alienation: characters find familiar norms and relationships thinning out as they move through workplaces, cities, and cross-border routes that do not “recognize” them. Identity, in turn, becomes fragmented, split between inherited attachments (dialect, kinship, hometown routines) and the demands of new environments that reward reinvention or compliance. Nostalgia then functions less as a soft sentiment than as a coping attempt: it offers a temporary anchor for belonging

and continuity, yet it also exposes the limits of repair when return is impossible or when the past no longer fits the present.

Caught by the Tides (2024) presents this emotion in a formalized way: it re-edits twenty years of footage into a "visual autobiography". The female protagonist in the film remains almost silent and moves through different eras. By integrating archival clips and new materials, this film transforms the images themselves into carriers of memories, demonstrating the film's ability to preserve fleeting moments.

More than a retrospective montage, the re-editing foregrounds how memory is made: earlier images are not simply "reused," but re-positioned so that their meanings shift when placed beside later scenes and later contexts. In this sense, the archive does not function as background evidence; it becomes the organizing principle of the narrative, turning time itself into a visible material that can be cut, repeated, and reframed.

The protagonist's near-silence reinforces this archival logic. Rather than explaining the past through dialogue, the film lets gestures, locations, and recurring faces carry continuity across historical breaks. Her movement through different eras works less as a conventional character arc than as a thread linking discontinuous moments—making the viewer track change through what persists (a glance, a song, a familiar street) and what vanishes (work units, neighborhoods, dialect worlds). The film thus stages nostalgia not as a return to an intact "home," but as an encounter with fragments that can be recognized yet cannot be restored.

Formally, Jia sustains a coherent aesthetic: extended takes and lateral pans dilate time; low-saturation digital palettes preserve faint visual traces; on-screen pop songs and ambient noise trigger collective memory; and a documentary–fiction blend blurs evidence with recollection. Across these later works, violence and migration sharpen the sense of rupture, while archival re-editing gives that rupture a distinct form—one in which longing is registered through what the image can still hold, and through what it can no longer retrieve. Violence, migration, and archival longing thus converge in a reflective nostalgia that mourns without promising return.

Recent commentary on *Caught by the Tides* points in the same direction. The film has been read as turning archival recomposition itself into a way of thinking about historical time and loss, which supports the present argument without displacing the primacy of close textual analysis [7-8].

5. Conclusion

Through cinematic practice, Jia Zhangke addresses a central question of the age: how do we remember "home" when it is continually propelled forward by modernization? Across the films discussed, reflective nostalgia operates as a consistent logic rather than a decorative theme: it registers the tension between locality and modernization, stages spatial fragmentation and the reassembly of memory in landscapes of demolition and relocation, and, in later works, extends earlier patterns of displacement into cross-border migration and archival return, rendering rupture irreversible rather than recoverable.

From *Xiao Wu* to *Caught by the Tides*, Jia's camera not only archives individuals but also renders attachment and belonging socially legible. Read in social-psychological terms, nostalgia in these films functions as a psychosocial mechanism in Davis's sense: it temporarily sustains identity continuity, enables meaning-making under discontinuity, and channels private recollection into shared affect that can circulate as collective memory [3].

The same corpus also speaks to environmental and spatial psychology. By repeatedly foregrounding erosion of place—demolition sites, submerged towns, repurposed factories, and provisional urban zones—the films link changing landscapes to the weakening of place attachment and to the psychology of displacement. What emerges is not a narrative of restoration but of environmental grief: a subdued mourning for places and everyday textures that cannot be retrieved once transformation is complete, a condition that helps explain why Jia's nostalgia remains reflective and oriented toward witnessing rather than return.

This article combines close, text-centered film reading with limited paratextual triangulation, which helps situate claims about collective legibility without turning the study into a reception analysis. Even so, it does not measure audience response directly. Future work could extend this approach through a larger and more systematic body of reception materials—such as reviews, interviews, or viewer accounts—and compare how different viewing communities articulate "home" and loss in response to the same images. Even as AI-generated imagery and hybrid media proliferate, Jia's loss-centered film language continues to resist oblivion by insisting on the ethical and historical weight of what images can still hold—and what they cannot.

References

1. Zhu, J. (2019). *Fragments and nostalgia: A study of Jia Zhangke's cinema*. Beijing: China Film Press.
2. Boym, S. (2001). *The future of nostalgia*. New York: Basic Books.
3. Davis, F. (1979). *Nostalgia: A sociological perspective*. New York: Routledge.
4. Jia, Z. (2014). *Jia thinks [in Chinese]*. Beijing: Beijing Press.
5. Schultz, C. K. N. (2016). Ruin in the films of Jia Zhangke. *Visual Communication*, 15(4), 439–460.
6. Yang, Y. (2023). Image nostalgia: The politics of memory in Jia Zhangke's cinema. *Contemporary Cinema*, (5).
7. Wang, H. (2025). Aesthetic experiment and era reflections in Jia Zhangke's film *Caught by the Tides*. *Arts*, 14(6), 150.
8. Caminade de Schuytter, M., & Amiel, V. (2025). Jia Zhangke's *Caught by the Tides*. *Esprit*, (7–8), 165–172.

About the Author

Yuan Zhang was born in Lvliang City, Shanxi Province, P.R. China, in 1988. She obtained her Bachelor's degree from Communication University of China in Nanjing, and her Master's degree from Communication University of China. She is currently pursuing her doctoral studies at the Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Universiti Putra Malaysia. Her primary research focus is on Film and Television Communication.

Siti Aishah binti Hj Mohammad Razi is currently a Lecturer at Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM). Her primary research focus is on Broadcasting (TV & Radio), Media Literacy, Media Content, and Health Communication within the field of Mass Media. She obtained her Bachelor's degree in Broadcasting from Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Malaysia, and her Master's degree in Media Management from Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia (USIM). She earned her Doctor of Philosophy in Communication from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM).