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Unreal Reality: Post-socialist China's Massive Infrastructural Agenda

in Jia Zhangke's "Three Gorges Films"

A Thesis by

Weiting Liu

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Orange, CA

Dodge College of Film and Media Arts

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in Film Studies

May 2020

Committee in charge:

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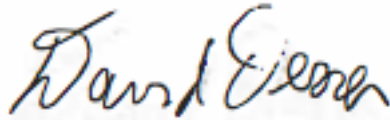
CHAPMAN UNIVERSITY  
DODGE COLLEGE  
OF FILM AND MEDIA ARTS

The thesis of Weiting Liu is approved.



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April 2020

Unreal Reality: Post-socialist China's Massive Infrastructural Agenda  
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## ABSTRACT

### Unreal Reality: Post-socialist China's Massive Infrastructural Agenda in Jia Zhangke's "Three Gorges Films"

by Weiting Liu

This thesis focuses on Chinese Six-Generation film director Jia Zhangke's "Three Gorges films" *Still Life* (2006) and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018) to demonstrate his critique of the dire impact of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) massive infrastructural agenda on Chinese citizens' lives and psyches in post-socialist Chinese society. Starting with the analysis of *Still Life*, this thesis first examines Jia's experimentation with the computerized UFO imagery incorporated into the film's realist narratives and themes to deliver the sense of unreality people feel towards the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, the world's largest hydroelectric power station and post-socialist China's largest infrastructural project. Revisiting the subject matter of the Three Gorges Dam in *Ash Is Purest White*, Jia extends his examination of the CCP's post-socialist infrastructural agenda into other parts of China outside the Three Gorges region.

This thesis connects *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White* in which both films' female protagonists go to the Three Gorges construction site in search of their estranged male partners, and they both experience the unreal moments of UFO sightings. While he presents the Three Gorges construction's destructive consequences of housing demolitions, resident evictions and hazards and casualties in *Still Life*, Jia emphasizes the psychological impact the CCP's compulsory infrastructural agenda has on the wounded psyche of *Ash Is Purest White*'s female protagonist. Furthermore, Jia's reference to Hong Kong gangster films in *Still Life* is extended into *Ash Is Purest White*'s major narrative and character setup. This thesis argues that Hong

Kong gangster film references in Jia's "Three Gorges films" signify the sentimental tragedy and symbolic death of Chinese citizens' individual agency and interpersonal connection deprived by post-socialist China's economic and sociopolitical confinement resulted from the CCP's compulsory infrastructural agenda.

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## Introduction

*Thousands of years of history were suddenly submerged, millions of people were displaced, and their fate was changed because of the (Three Gorges) project. I thought talking about this in one film was not enough. It needs to be mentioned repeatedly. It shouldn't be forgotten.*<sup>1</sup>

The above quote originates from Chinese film director Jia Zhangke's 2019 interview about his latest film *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), which revisits the Three Gorges Dam, a topic Jia explored in his 2006 film *Still Life*. In this interview, Jia emphasizes the astronomical scale of the Three Gorges construction while reiterating the urgent need to examine the consequences it caused in terms of the Chinese population's displacement. Among Jia's filmography, *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White* are the two films that dig into the subject matter of the Three Gorges Dam, contemporary China's largest-scale infrastructural project under the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) state-led developmental policy. The significance of these two films, which I term as Jia's "Three Gorges films," resides in their sociopolitical critique of the CCP's infrastructural agenda enforcing the compulsory construction of the Three Gorges Dam. Accordingly, Jia's cinematic juxtaposition of the CCP's infrastructural policy-making with Chinese individuals' human rights can be analyzed in terms of "national character" (国民性) and "modern individualism" (现代个人主义) as defined by Chinese linguistics scholar Lydia Liu.

In her sociopolitical analysis of modern Chinese literature from 1900 to 1937 before the CCP's founding of the People's Republic of China, Liu introduces that modern China's political and cultural ideology during this time period was dominated by the anti-feudal, anti-imperialist May Fourth movement's promotion of nationalism, which characterized the nation state's

<sup>1</sup> Jeffrey M. Anderson, "Jia Zhangke Touches on Favorite Themes in Masterful 'Ash Is Purest White,'" *San Francisco Examiner*, March 14, 2019.

“national character.” Regarding China’s nation building, the May Fourth Movement’s pioneer writers such as Lu Xun and Hu Shi viewed “modern individualism” as an alternative narrative that ran counter to the “national character” of nationalism they promoted.<sup>2</sup> Although Liu’s terms were developed in her historical literary analysis, they are useful in analyzing Jia’s post-socialist films advocating for Chinese people’s “modern individualism,” which counters the “national character” of the CCP’s massive infrastructure building as one of the most important agendas of contemporary China’s nation building. Accordingly, Jia’s “Three Gorges films” critique this “national character” by demonstrating the dire impact of the CCP’s infrastructural building on ordinary people’s lives and psyches.

Within contemporary China’s economic and sociopolitical conditions, *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White* represent China’s “post-socialist cinema,” of which Jia is one of the leading figures. Paul Pickowicz, an American historian of modern China, uses the term “post-socialism” to explain the state of post-1990s contemporary China, marked by “public disillusionment and skepticism about officially defined socialist ideology.”<sup>3</sup> This definition is contextualized within the CCP’s policy of political and economic reform, guided by the motto “socialism with Chinese characteristics” that prioritized economic development above anything else.<sup>4</sup> In response, Jia’s “Three Gorges films” present direct narrative addresses of the Three Gorges construction’s dire consequences of demolitions and evictions ordered by the CCP against the local residents’ will.

<sup>2</sup> Lydia. *Translingual Practice: Literature, National Culture, and Translated Modernity—China, 1900-1937*. Stanford: Stanford U. Press, 1995, 195.

<sup>3</sup> Paul G. Pickowicz, "Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China." In *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, edited by Paul Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, 1–21 (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 1.

<sup>4</sup> Nick Browne, *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 4.

Jia's "Three Gorges films" are also particularly significant in their presentation of surreal or magical moments of UFO sightings, which is a clear deviation from Jia's usual realist filmmaking that mostly relies on location shooting and long take to portray the lived experiences of ordinary Chinese citizens. Regarding *Still Life*'s realism, film scholar Zhang Yingjin praises Jia for "his subjective perception of the real 'condition of life.'"<sup>5</sup> This appraisal of Zhang's points out that Jia's realist themes and narratives are centered by his intention of exploring the underrepresented living conditions of the local people in the Three Gorges region. Regarding the film's incorporation of its UFO moment into these realist themes and narratives, film scholar Jason McGrath argues, "The insertion of magical special effects images appears to assert an ideal of freedom that sustains people through such traumatic transformations."<sup>6</sup> For McGrath, Jia's insertion of computerized imageries represents his intention of presenting an imagined better reality contrasting local Chinese people's actual living conditions deprived of freedom.

While *Still Life*'s surreal moments are most noticeably represented by Jia's computerized imagery of the UFO sighting, I argue that it aims at delivering the sense of unreality that Chinese people perceive as they experience the massive infrastructural construction. Chinese people feel as if they are experiencing infrastructural constructions that are too enormous for anyone to comprehend. Ironically, this unreal presentation is what defines one of the most realistic aspects of post-socialist China, not to represent an imagined alternative reality as argued by McGrath. In addition, *Still Life*'s moment of UFO sighting is extended into *Ash Is Purest White*, which breaks

<sup>5</sup> Zhang, Yingjin. "My Camera Doesn't Lie? Truth, Subjectivity, and Audience in Chinese Independent Film and Video." In *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China*, edited by Paul Pickowicz and Zhang Yingjin, 23-46. Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 27.

<sup>6</sup> McGrath, Jason. "The Cinema of Displacement: The Three Gorges in Feature Film and Video," *Displacement: The Three Gorges Dam and Contemporary Chinese Art*. Edited by Wu Hing. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 41.

even further away from Jia's usual realist approach in response to the increasingly jarring modernization process of post-socialist China in the last twelve years since the release of *Still Life*. This thesis narratively connects *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White* in which both films' female protagonists visit the Three Gorges construction site from Shanxi Province in search of their estranged male partners, and both of them experience the UFO sightings.

However, while *Still Life* reveals the housing demolitions, on-site casualties, physical traumas and hazards of displacement caused by the Three Gorges construction, *Ash Is Purest White* focuses on the female protagonist's psychological wound and self-discovery as she travels through the Three Gorges region and other parts of China. Her journey through parts of China that are uniformly and continuously experiencing compulsory infrastructural development manifests the economic agenda's profound impact on Chinese individuals' psyche of uncertainty and instability. Thus, the UFO sighting in *Ash Is Purest White* actually represent and enhance the psychological realities of Chinese people. Therefore, Jia's realism exploring Chinese people's living conditions is aestheticized and stylized with bizarre surreal flair to visualize the unimaginability of China's rapid development, which leaves its own people dazed and displaced.

The comparison between *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White* also reveals another major connection between the two films: their reference to Hong Kong gangster films. In *Still Life*, the local Chinese people in the Three Gorges area watch Hong Kong gangster films to escape the restrictive reality they live within. In *Ash Is Purest White*, however, main characters within the narrative actually live the gangster, criminal life in mainland China's Shanxi Province, Jia's own hometown. Thus, Jia's reference to Hong Kong gangster cinema in *Still Life* is extended to *Ash Is Purest White*'s major narrative and character setup. I argue that in Jia's "Three Gorges films," Hong Kong gangster cinema signifies not only escapism from harsh realities, but also the

sentimental tragedy and symbolic death of the characters' individual agency and interpersonal connection deprived by post-socialist China's economic and sociopolitical confinement.

By examining the narratives and themes of displacement and disorientation in Jia Zhangke's "Three Gorges films" *Still Life* and *Ash is Purest White*, this thesis demonstrates that, while these films question and critique the compulsory and unsustainable nature of the CCP's infrastructural development carried out at the expense of Chinese individuals' welfare and self-agency, Jia's incorporation of the UFO moments enhances his depiction of people's living conditions within post-socialist China where citizens' "modern individualism" is impeded by the "national character" of the CCP's economic reign. In order to highlight the significance of Jia's critique of this "national character" in these films, it is important to contextualize his filmmaking within Chinese cinema's transition from historical socialist cinema to contemporary post-socialist cinema.

### **Chinese Post-socialist Cinema and Realist Aesthetics in Jia Zhangke's Films**

At the start of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) led by the CCP, the aesthetics of socialist realism were officialized as the essence of Chinese national cinema by the government's policy regulating the film industry. Socialist realist Chinese cinema was entirely controlled and censored by the Communist Party regime as a propaganda tool to promote a socialist ideology of nationalist unity and collectivity. Socialist realist aesthetics during this time were characterized by narratives of China's historic socialist revolutions led by Communist political leadership to emancipate the proletariat and peasants. To fight battles for the socialist revolution, the films' protagonists undergo political and ideological transformations, making personal sacrifices for the greater calling of establishing China as a socialist nation state.

Zhang Yingjin has discussed films by director Xie Jin as examples of Chinese socialist realist cinema during the Cultural Revolution, especially *The Red Detachment of Women* (1960) and *Two Stage Sisters* (1964). According to Zhang, Xie's films were uniformly produced under the Communist Party's state sanction as some of the only few "model operas" curated by Chairman Mao's wife Jiang Qing, who was in charge of censoring China's film industry.<sup>7</sup> Both *Red Detachment of Women* and *Two Stage Sisters*' narratives unfold as the socialist revolutions ideologically transform the female protagonists, as they devote themselves to the Communist army against the landlord power. And their character developments are emphasized in terms of their increasing willingness to forego their individual desire of either seeking personal revenge or getting together with their love interests. Eventually, they sing deifying praises for the supreme leadership of the Communist Party, which subverts the nationwide oppression from the exploitive landlord class. Aesthetically, the films highlight moments and scenes of protagonists idolized and deified as the symbol of socialist revolution through low camera angles that enlarge them at the center of the frame. Through choreographed and theatrical performances, the leading actresses pose themselves in statuesque manners, with hard lighting, which embeds the still, perpetual imageries of their faces and bodies as an advocate for the ultimate and eternal truth of the socialist revolutions.

As the decade-long Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976 was proven to be a regressive failure in all ideological, cultural, and economic aspects, new generations of Chinese filmmakers, including the 1980s and 1990s Fifth Generation and the post-1990s Sixth Generation, both break away from socialist realist aesthetics in their resistance to the CCP's censorship. Directors Zhang

<sup>7</sup> Zhang Yingjin, "Cinema and The Nation-state in the PRC, 1949-78" in *Chinese National Cinema*. (New York: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 87.

Yimou and Chen Kaige, representatives of the Fifth Generation, made their names by depicting China's historical traumas from the Cultural Revolution in their early films. They first led the cinematic movement of the New Chinese Cinema in the 1980s and 1990s, showing "the interplay between individual experience and wider political and social developments."<sup>8</sup> At the center of the New Chinese Cinema is the Fifth Generation's narrative focus on telling personal stories of Chinese individuals to expose China's sociopolitical conditions during and in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution.

Studying China's history of pain and trauma represented in Chinese cinema, film scholar Michael Berry applies Bakhtin's terms to categorize contemporary China's traumas as "centripetal," or official, versus "centrifugal," or unofficial.<sup>9</sup> Berry also argues that Chinese films provide "the massive social, historical, and philosophical dimensions" of "historical forces and ideological conflicts in a lucid and personal narrative."<sup>10</sup> In this sense, China's centripetal/official trauma is defined by the CCP's official acknowledgment of the Cultural Revolution as a failure.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, China's centrifugal/unofficial traumas refer to the Cultural Revolution's devastating impact on ordinary Chinese people, whose personal tragedies have not been officially acknowledged. Accordingly, China's official trauma under the CCP's regime manifests its impact on the Fifth Generation's depiction of unofficial personal traumas. For example, Zhang Yimou's *To Live* (1994) narratively presents a family melodrama in which the

<sup>8</sup> Paul Clark, *Reinventing China: A Generation and Its Films*. (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 2005), 75.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Berry, *A History of Pain: Trauma in Modern Chinese Literature and Film*. (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>10</sup> Berry, *A History of Pain*, 328.

<sup>11</sup> *People's Daily*, Chinese Communist Party's official publication, declared in their editorial on May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2016, the Cultural Revolution's 50-year anniversary: "History has proven that the cultural revolution was a complete mistake, it is not and could never be a revolution or social progress in any sense."

protagonist's family goes through the turmoil and pathos of multiple national crises across their lifetime, when his daughter dies from the Cultural Revolution mandated by the CCP. Therefore, the film's realist narrative exposes the physical and psychological traumas inflicted on the bodies and minds of ordinary Chinese people.

In comparison, Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) directly addresses the Cultural Revolution's political persecution and ideological suppression of Chinese intellectuals and artists, as well as the top-down censorship of cultural and artistic expression. *Farewell My Concubine*'s narratives unfold around the love triangle regarding a Peking opera star, his co-star, and the co-star's wife, a former prostitute. The extremity and tragedy of human conditions under the CCP's political witch hunt are manifested in the film's public torture scene involving all three main characters. In this torture scene rendered in a fiery long take, young students, who are supposedly the candidates to become intellectuals, crowd together as bearers and executioners of the CCP's political persecution.

Inheriting the legacy of the Fifth Generation, the Sixth Generation represented by Jia Zhangke also tackles the sociopolitical issues of China's national traumas through personal stories of ordinary Chinese people. However, the Sixth Generation breaks away from the Fifth Generation's historical narrative of the past, focusing on the Cultural Revolution in their allegorical critique of the CCP. And the focus of this breakaway is to represent Chinese individuals' personal psychological traumas unacknowledged by the state reign, which are aesthetically manifested by the Six Generation's jarring cinematography to deliver the sense of disorientation. While the Fifth Generation relies on the traditional linear mode of storytelling with narratives neatly put together for the audience to easily follow, the Sixth Generation focuses on the present of contemporary post-socialist Chinese society through documentary-like, realist,



underground filmmaking, and in turn realizes its “independence, unofficial quality, and non-commercial interests.”<sup>12</sup> Therefore, the Sixth Generation’s filmmaking principle of presenting unofficial narratives leads to its telling personal individual stories that manifest post-socialist China’s centrifugal/unofficial traumas categorized by Michael Berry.

Jia and his Sixth-Generation peers such as Lou Ye and Wang Xiaoshuai aim at making independent Chinese films about the reality of contemporary Chinese society and personal experiences of Chinese people, uninterrupted by the CCP’s officialized political ideologies imposed on the Chinese film industry. For example, the urban scenes along the filthy waterway in Shanghai’s underbelly in Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River* (2000) are stylistically shot on a Super 8mm film camera to render the film’s documentary-like, amateur aesthetics. The wandering, disorienting handheld camera movements bring out the urban ruins of deserted buildings and housing demolitions in rundown, forgotten neighborhoods. *Suzhou River*’s gloomy, gritty pathology of the Chinese city is presented through the aesthetics of jarring videography similar to those of Jia’s in *Still Life*’s housing demolition scenes; the decrepit pathology of China’s urban scenes also poses an antithesis to the CCP’s official showcasing and boasting of its infrastructural achievements.

While the visuals of demolished neighborhoods in Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River* reveal post-socialist China’s underdeveloped and underrepresented facade, director Wang Xiaoshuai’s *The Days* (1993) at the Sixth Generation’s very start overtly defied the CCP’s political agenda of film censorship. *The Days* directly addresses the aftermath of the 1989 Tiananmen Square crackdown by presenting the realist narrative of the personal conflicts between a married couple. *The Days*’ realistic depiction of the 1989 crackdown’s aftermath led to the Chinese government’s complete

<sup>12</sup> Clark, *Reinventing China*, 75.

ban of the film, while it was shown in international festivals. Represented by directors such as Wang Xiaoshuai and Lou Ye, the Sixth Generation, from its early stage of formation, always contains a “subversive message” against the CCP’s political agenda, which results in the Chinese government’s censorship of their films, as well as the films’ “limited distribution and exhibition venues within the country.”<sup>13</sup> Lacking the government’s official approval and financial support from domestic investment, Jia Zhangke, as a representative of the Sixth Generation, is no exception and launched his career funded by international financial resources.

Facing the Chinese government’s film censorship and ban, Jia’s career path demonstrates the Sixth Generation’s resorting to international co-production and exhibition. In post-socialist China, “capitalist modes and relations of production have been increasingly implemented in *nominally* socialist China as the country joined the global capitalist regime.”<sup>14</sup> Therefore, there forms mutual stimulation between international film festivals’ growing interest in post-socialist Chinese cinema and the Sixth Generation’s choice of international co-production of their films. Jia’s 2000 film *Platform* is the example of a “truly globalized product” “financed through the combined resources of production companies and government agencies in Japan, France, Switzerland, (and) Hong Kong”<sup>15</sup> outside the CCP’s political and economic control.

Thematically and narratively, *Platform* represents Chinese citizens’ ideological transition from a socialist collective consciousness to post-socialist individual expression. Chinese film scholar Jiwei Xiao emphasizes that Jia’s realism most significantly restores “the concrete

<sup>13</sup> Jiwei Xiao, “The Quest for Memory: Documentary and Fiction in Jia Zhangke's Films.” *Senses of Cinema* 59, 2011, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Sheldon H. Lu, *Chinese Modernity and Global Biopolitics: Studies in Literature and Visual Culture* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2007), 208.

<sup>15</sup> Jason McGrath, *Postsocialist Modernity: Chinese Cinema, Literature, and Criticism in the Market Age*. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010), 148.

memory of place to evoke individual history in a rapidly modernizing society” and “recovers the immediate past in order to imagine the future.”<sup>16</sup> Here, Jia’s realism in *Platform* refers to the film’s narrative focus on individual characters caught in the nation state’s modernizing progress between the past memories of national trauma and the present dilemma of compulsory development, both attributed to the CCP’s policy-making. What is characteristically post-socialist about *Platform* resides in that, although the film depicts the present reality of China and Chinese people, the present is always haunted by the nation state’s historical and sociopolitical traumas from the past.

Amongst all the haze and rush of this transitional post-socialist period, the characters of the youth generation in *Platform* are suddenly bombarded and bedazzled by the incoming flow of international novelties, while still rooted in a country run by socialist rules and regulations. They suddenly see a new hope of freeing themselves to pursue their dreams, yet end up finding themselves too confused to catch up with the country’s fast-paced changes in its economic and cultural landscapes. One disillusionment after another, the film’s youth-generation protagonists immerse themselves in the soft voices and romantic melodies of Taiwanese pop songs. Accordingly, Jia applies his usual realist aesthetic of long take to render the female protagonist’s psychological longing for songs that express her emotions of confusion and angst.

In the scene where she listens to a pop song about the pain of a lost love, Jia presents an establishing shot of the room she is in, with a fixed camera position. She is first shown as sitting on the chair in the background, listening to the song from the radio placed on the desk. But as the lyrics sing, “How many times must I feel this pain?”, she suddenly stands up and starts dancing, moving from the background to the foreground while improvising her choreography in response

<sup>16</sup> Xiao, "The Quest for Memory," 1.

to the song's melodies. Thus, her voluntary initiation and procession of the dance's body movements symbolize that her consciousness of pain and pathos is aroused by unofficial melodies in contrast to the state's official promotion of Communist propaganda songs in appraisal of the CCP's political reign, which were also performed by her as one of the members in a theater troupe.

In discussion of this scene, McGrath describes, "The private melodies found in popular culture struck a note that contrasted with the official language of revolution."<sup>17</sup> Here, "the private melodies" that the Chinese youth listen to reflect their psyche of sorrow and disorientation to navigate around post-socialist China's economic and sociopolitical changes, which resonates with Lydia Liu's term of "modern individualism." This "modern individualism" is counteracted by the "official language of revolution," resonating with Liu's term of "national character" represented by the CCP's official reform of prioritizing economic development over humane care for Chinese citizens.

Regarding *Platform*'s illustration of post-socialist China's "modern individualism" against its "national character," the film should be perceived as the turning point at the start of the emergence of Chinese post-socialist cinema. *Platform* established Jia's directorial style of realist themes and narratives digging into ordinary Chinese people's psyches shaped by the country's confounding transitions under the CCP's political and economic agenda. However, in *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White*, Jia moves away from his realist filmmaking established in *Platform*. This cinematic realism in *Platform* as representative of the usual realism Jia employs in most of his films provides a clear contrast to the realism in *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White*. The two films adopt and experiment with magical moments of UFOs to visualize these psyches,

<sup>17</sup> McGrath, *Post-socialist Modernity*, 149.

which contributes to enhancing the authenticity and perceptivity of documentary-like realist themes and narratives.

### ***Still Life*: Jia Zhangke's Incorporation of Computerized Imagery into Realist Filmmaking**

*Still Life* presents two main storylines that revolve respectively around the film's male protagonist Han Sanming, a construction worker laboring on the Three Gorges project's demolition site, and the female protagonist Shen Hong, a nurse from the Shanxi Province visiting the site from outside. These two characters share the commonality in that they are both in the Three Gorges region's Fengjie County in search of their estranged spouses, as they witness and experience the ongoing displacement and disorientation caused by this massive infrastructural construction. Referring to *Still Life*'s subject matter of the Three Gorges Dam that reveals the post-socialist conditions of China, McGrath poses the question below regarding the film's Three Gorges narratives:

Does the massive (Three Gorges) dam project signify ... that China has lost its grounding, as its history and traditions are wiped out by the tide of breakneck economic development at all costs? <sup>18</sup>

Indeed, the erasure of natural and cultural histories turns out to be one of the dire consequences of the project's construction, which is represented in Jia's usual realist aesthetic of location shooting of the Yangzi River region on the verge of destruction and inundation. Since the Three Gorges construction started, local people in the Yangzi River region were compulsorily evicted from their homes. Their residential buildings and communities were

<sup>18</sup> Jason McGrath, "The Cinema of Displacement: The Three Gorges in Feature Film and Video," *Displacement*, 44.

demolished to make space for the dam; the local communities were also vacated for flooding and inundation once water levels rose above the ground due to reservoir construction. During *Still Life*'s opening sequence displaying the Yangzi region's natural landscape, the mise-en-scene places the waterfront of Baidi County in the foreground and the hazy silhouette of Kuimen County's riverside residential area in the background, where the local people currently live. Within the same frame, the concrete construction of the dam is shown as pushing the fluctuating water levels from the reservoir toward the riverside of the residential county, on the verge of inundating Kuimen ground. Here, the film foreshadows that, what is still left in this area, including current residential buildings and ancient natural and cultural histories, will in fact soon be wiped out by the infrastructural construction of the Three Gorges at an unimaginably fast speed.

This need for speed to build the Three Gorges Dam was determined at the very start in the project's blueprint, first pushed forward in 1980 by Chairman Deng Xiaoping, as in the reforming CCP committee's broader national plan of infrastructural building, for the nation state's economic advancement and more efficient allocation of water and electricity resources.<sup>19</sup> Then in 1990 after a decade of professional engineering planning and regional field research, the National Congress of China passed the resolution among controversy to officially enforce the building of the Three Gorges Dam. Following the construction guidelines proposed in this Congress conference, the Three Gorges will be built according to the slogan of "Single Exploitation, Single Completion, Multiple Impoundings, Consecutive Immigrations."<sup>20</sup> Upon its completion in 2009, the reservoir was expected to inundate Hubei Province and Chongqing city's

<sup>19</sup> "World's Largest Dam—the Three Gorges Dam Officially Completed." *China Daily*, May 20, 2006,. 4. Translated from Chinese by me.

<sup>20</sup> *China Daily*, 4.

20 counties, 270 villages, 1,500 corporations, and 34 million square meters of residential housing. From the start of the Three Gorges onsite construction in 1993 to its 90 percent completion in 2005, 100,000 local residents annually, which means 11 million locals in these 12 years of construction, have been evicted and relocated from their hometowns to other regions.<sup>21</sup>

Upon its completion in 2009, the Three Gorges Dam was 185m tall, with an impounding height of 175m, the length of the reservoir was 2,335m, and an investment total of 135.26 billion Chinese Yuan. It has become the world's largest hydroelectric power station, as well as China's largest-scale infrastructural project in history.<sup>22</sup> However, in *Still Life*, Jia poses a thematic inquiry: underneath this formidable national achievement, completed in less than two decades, what have happened to the local Chinese people either evicted from their homes or recruited as cheap labor for housing demolitions and reservoir building? In *Still Life*'s realist narratives directly addressing the Three Gorges construction's consequences, Jia consolidates his critique toward the CCP's enforcement of resident evictions and housing demolitions that led to protests, casualties, and deaths.

Other than presenting the project's consequence of the destruction of regional landscapes, Jia also adopts his usual realist narratives and aesthetics to depict Chinese people's everyday life in the Three Gorges region, highlighted by tragedies caused by construction demolitions. In arguably the most haunting scene of *Still Life*, Jia applies a two-minute long take, starting with Sanming, who picks up his phone on the demolition site of a building to call his friend Xiao Ma, who is also his co-worker at the same site. Then a ringtone starts to sound, which keeps lingering

<sup>21</sup> *China Daily*, 6.

<sup>22</sup> "Audit Department: Finance and Audit Result for the Completion of Changjiang River's Three Gorges Project." Official Website for the Central People's Government of the People's Republic of China. (www. GOV.cn.) June 7, 2013. Translated from Chinese by me.

somewhere in the building with no one answering, as the camera pans and follows Sanming trying to locate the source of the sound across the already half-demolished building, with holed walls, piled debris, and steel bars sticking out of the concrete ceiling. Meanwhile, the group of Sanming's other co-workers stand still with their eyesight fixated toward the outside of the building, looking at the riverside region, which is again shown as a blurry silhouette in the background.

As the camera pan follows Sanming to the source of the ringtone coming from the inside of a huge pile of debris and ruins, he realizes that Xiao Ma has already been buried underneath due to an accident. With the long panning of the camera, Jia displays the sweeping visuals of the chaos and destruction of the housing demolition site. Accordingly, this scene represents the film's critique of the state's pursuit of forcibly powering through the fast-paced building of the Three Gorges, at the expense of local people as cheap laborers put in great risk of construction accidents. It also exemplifies the ways in which the "national character" of the CCP's compulsory infrastructural and economic agenda contradicts the "modern individualism" of Chinese citizens' individual safety in post-socialist China.

Xiao Ma's ringtone is actually the theme song from *The Bund* (1980) starring Chow Yun-fat, with the famous Hong Kong film star playing the gangster protagonist. Before his death caused by the construction site accident, Xiao Ma was obsessed with watching Chow's Hong Kong gangster films in his leisure time. In a dialogue scene with Sanming, Xiao Ma exhilaratingly expresses his longing for an adventurous gangster lifestyle, juxtaposed with his lived reality of being a construction worker with a meager livelihood in perilous working conditions, which eventually leads to his tragic death. In another scene, Xiao Ma attentively watches another gangster film of Chow's on his cheap, tiny television, the screen of which is



placed on the right side of the frame, forming the visual effect of the screen of Hong Kong cinema within the screen of *Still Life*. This scene reflects that local Chinese people resort to Hong Kong films as a mental escape from their real living conditions trapped within the Chinese government's compulsory economic agenda. Furthermore, Jia's reference to Hong Kong gangster cinema in characterizing Xiao Ma represents the film's examination of the local Chinese people's psychological experience in the Three Gorges region.

In addition to the perilous working conditions of Three Gorges' construction, Jia directly addresses the issue of resident protests toward the Chinese government's refusal of monetary compensations for housing demolitions. In one of *Still Life*'s opening scenes where a ship's performer is doing his magic trick of conjuring up money to entertain the crowd, the original scenery of the Yangzi River's natural landscape before the demolition happens to be shown as printed on the money's paper bills. Here, then, money becomes the symbol of both China's natural landscapes and capitals flowing into the nation state's economic and infrastructural development. On one hand, China has achieved so much growth in so little time; on the other, most ordinary Chinese people, such as the ones on this ship migrating for their livelihood, are still in dire need of money and materials. In this early scene of *Still Life*, Jia already foreshadows that the Chinese government's denial of the residents' request for monetary compensation will further deteriorate the local people's living conditions, especially after their houses are compulsorily demolished.

In the scene of resident protest, a crowd of local residents from Fengjie County surrounds a low-ranking government staffer, from whom they demand more monetary compensation for the demolition of their housing and compulsory evictions ordered by the government to leave their hometown. Overwhelmed and frustrated by the residents' clamor, the government staffer

shouts at them, “How can there not be a problem? A city with 2,000 years of history must disappear in two decades. How can there not be a problem?” In this lens, *Still Life* empathizes with local people’s living conditions during the infrastructural building, confronted with the fact that they have no choice but to follow this mandatory political and economic current; they are either evicted from their hometowns while their houses are being demolished, or ordered to partake in the labor force for these housing demolitions. Jia himself, in an interview in 2009 regarding *Still Life*, comments on this rapid change and impact on local people’s lives:

When I went to look at Fengjie, the location where we shot the film, every county we saw had basically been reduced to rubble. Seeing this place, with its 2,000 years of history and dense neighborhoods left in ruins, my first impression was that human beings could not have done this. The changes had occurred so fast and on such a large scale, it was as if nuclear war or an extraterrestrial had done it.<sup>23</sup>

Accordingly, Jia’s “extraterrestrial” sentiment and perception of the Three Gorges construction’s cause of disorienting changes and dire consequences are incorporated into *Still Life*’s insertion of the film’s unreal computerized UFO imagery.

*Still Life*’s UFO sighting takes place in one of the first scenes of the film’s female protagonist Hong. In the scene, she has just arrived at the Three Gorges region and climbed to the mountaintop above the Yangzi River, and she gets an overview of what is happening below on the project’s construction site. Jia starts this particular scene with a combination of long take and location shooting, which are his usual realist aesthetics. To illustrate, Jia frames the natural landscapes within a panoramic, wide horizon shot. Then, Jia applies a slow camera pan to follow

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Chan, "Online Exclusive Interview with Jia Zhangke," *Film Comment*, March–April, 2009. [www.filmcomment.com/article/jia-zhangke-interview](http://www.filmcomment.com/article/jia-zhangke-interview).

an UFO that first appears in the cloudy sky at the screen's top left corner, while the camera pan presents a sweeping visual of the river, the riverside county, and the surrounding mountains.

As this camera pan follows the UFO, which moves from left to right, Hong, in her yellow outfit, pops up on the grey landscape. As she looks around the landscape, the flying UFO catches her eye. She accordingly turns from left to right, as her eyesight follows the UFO's trajectory until it disappears into the sky on the screen's top-right corner. In this sense, the realist aesthetics of the Three Gorges' landscape and construction site are disrupted by the computerized imagery of the flying UFO, which permeates the frame from left to right. Moreover, Hong's psyche of disorientation and unreality as she first arrives at the Three Gorges region is in visual sync with the timing of *Still Life's* UFO sighting, as well as its movement and trajectory leading Hong's body movement.

When the UFO is on the verge of disappearing, the eerie, electronic audio of its engine sound is replaced by the background audios of roaring and clacking from the construction and demolition sites down below. In the very next scene, Hong's sense of unreality and disorientation is further enhanced when she walks through the construction site. The two consecutive scenes are combined to demonstrate the ways in which Jia incorporates the surreal moment into the realism of *Still Life's* audiovisual depiction of demolitions and constructions. These audiovisuals expose the steel and concrete buildings being knocked down, as witnessed by Hong immediately after her UFO sighting. The audiovisuals of the Three Gorges' construction and demolition manifest the depth of Jia's film language that characterizes the ironies and dilemmas in post-socialist China's infrastructural development.

Therefore, Jia uses the visual metaphor of an UFO to reinstate the unimaginability of the reality of the Three Gorges' mass construction in *Still Life*. In addition, the re-appearance of the

same UFO in *Ash Is Purest White* in Xinjiang Province outside the Three Gorges region represents the extension of post-socialist China's economic development and infrastructural construction to other geographical locations, along with Chinese population's further displacement from their hometowns. At the end of *Still Life* in the aftermath of Xiao Ma's death, Han convinces the group of his co-workers to leave the Three Gorges' construction site and follow him back to his hometown Shanxi Province known for its abundance of coalmining sites, where they can become coalminers. However, before they leave for Shanxi, Sanming tells them, "Coal mining is a dangerous livelihood. Once you are deep down in the mine, you have to mentally prepare yourselves that you might never go back up to the ground again." This dialogue demonstrates the safety hazards facing these workers all over China for the sake of the CCP's unconditional priority of economic and infrastructural development.

In *Still Life*'s last scene, Jia applies a fixed camera position to present the demolished surroundings and a shattered pathway towards the Yangzi River below the mountains in silhouette. As Sanming and his co-workers form a line to walk through this pathway, he suddenly stops and looks to his right side, where the film cuts to a man in silhouette balance-walking on a high wire, with the wire's each end attached to two opposing demolished buildings. Meanwhile, the credit song begins to sound and the lyrics sing, "Looking over to the direction of hometown: the mountains are far away; the rivers are far away." This end scene's audiovisuals depict Three Gorges construction workers' continuous displacement and migration, while the man on high wire visually symbolizes the perilous living conditions of local people who are still in the Three Gorges region. The phenomenon of Chinese people's displacement and travel, as well as their unfulfilled desire for security and stability from hometowns are further represented in *Ash Is Purest White*'s travel and psyche of the film's female protagonist.

## *Ash Is Purest White:*

### **Psychological Wound of Post-socialist China's Infrastructural Construction**

While *Still Life* mainly focuses on the incidents that were happening in the middle of the Three Gorges' construction, *Ash Is Purest White*'s narrative follows the heroine Zhao Qiao's personal story spanning two decades, from her twenties in the 1990s to her forties in the 2010s. Qiao's journey in the film could be dissected into three main segments. The first embodies Qiao's gangster life in Shanxi Province with her criminal boyfriend Guo Bin. They both went to prison after a conflict between Bin and his rivals broke out in public, and Qiao shot a gun to save him. The second narrative segment follows Qiao as she travels to the Three Gorges region amidst the dam's construction to look for Bin and here, her character overlaps with Hong in *Still Life*. Hong's husband in *Still Life* and Bin in *Ash Is Purest White* both avoid their female partners. Third, having failed to locate Bin, who deliberately avoids her, Qiao continues to travel further west outside the Three Gorges region on China's express railway in the hope of finding a new life. Feeling disappointed and unresolved by what she experiences along the journey, she eventually settles back in her hometown of Shanxi at the end of the film as a middle-aged woman in her forties. Here, she continues to take charge of the teahouse which Bin and she used to run together, and establishes it as a thriving and successful business.

In *Still Life*, Hong experiences the extraterrestrial perceptivity of the unreality of the Three Gorges construction as she witnesses a UFO flying across the Yangzi River. In *Ash Is Purest White*, Qiao's UFO sighting appears at the end of her travel on the express railway in the far west region of China, where she eventually disembarks at the station in the Xinjiang Province. Regarding the film's narrative background leading to this particular scene, Qiao had initially decided to get off at the railway station of the city of Wuhan, where she had hoped to

find a new job after leaving the Three Gorges region in Fengjie County. However, on her railway route from Fengjie to Wuhan, an unnamed man started chatting her up and persuading her to go to Xinjiang Province with him. During his speech to persuade Qiao, he proposed that both could get into the tourism business in Xinjiang. Still hurt by Bin's refusal and unsure about her future, Qiao thinks that he could be a new man for her to rely on. Thus, she accepts the man's invitation. However, while they were on the railway en route to Xinjiang from Wuhan, he begins to ignore Qiao after she tells him that she once went to prison. Realizing that this man no longer wants to be with her, Qiao leaves him and instead disembarks at Xinjiang on her own in the middle of the night, and this is when Qiao spots the UFO.

In this night scene of Qiao's UFO sighting, Jia takes a different aesthetic approach than he does in *Still Life's* UFO sighting scene. In *Still Life*, Jia first presents an establishing wide shot of the Yangzi region's location shooting and applies a long take where the camera pan follows the UFO's slow movement from left to right. Here in *Ash Is Purest White*, Jia uses a tracking shot to directly follow Qiao as soon as she gets off the railway train. As she is shown walking beside Xinjiang's gritty desert and barren mountains, a mysterious white light starts flashing on and off on the screen as well as on her face, accompanied by the same eerie, electronic sound of the UFO's engine in *Still Life*. Then Jia cuts to his usual realist aesthetic of a wide horizon shot to show the surroundings within which Qiao is placed, where she stands in front of a demolished building placed at the center of the frame.

Here, the building's purpose before its demolition is undistinguishable, but its presence in the film's UFO scene symbolizes Jia's association of the sense of unreality delivered by surreal imageries to the demolitions in other parts of China beside the Three Gorges region. Meanwhile, the mysterious white light continues to flash behind the clouds while moving across the sky

above the building. At the end of this scene, the UFO, rather than just its white flashing light, finally appears and flies across the sky at a fast speed resembling that of a meteor's and quickly disappears into the cloudy night sky. Here, like in *Still Life*, the UFO's computerized imagery once again disrupts Jia's usual realist aesthetics to deliver the sense of unreality of the female protagonist's lived experiences.

It is worthwhile to note that the difference between the two films' UFO scenes, that in *Ash Is Purest White* it is the UFO which follows Qiao's movement while in *Still Life*, it is Hong who follows the UFO's movement. While the UFO imageries in both films represent a sense of unreality, *Still Life* uses this imagery to reflect on China's infrastructural condition, where Hong is just one of the Chinese people to experience the destruction. In comparison, the sense of unreality from the UFO sighting in *Ash Is Purest White* particularly refers to Qiao's psychological wound caused by the disorientation and displacement as the consequence of China's economic agenda. Since Qiao travels from the Three Gorges region, to the west of Wuhan city, and further west to the Xinjiang Province, she has experienced in all these regions the same sense of unreality led by infrastructural construction and economic development, as well as psychological distrust and betrayal from her former partner and new travel companion. Jia's different aesthetical approach of presenting the UFO sighting scene in *Ash Is Purest White* than that of *Still Life* signifies the director's intention of highlighting and focusing on the aftermath of these agendas by following the female protagonist instead of the UFO.

In *Still Life*, Hong is in the middle of the Three Gorges construction throughout the entire film. In *Ash Is Purest White*, Jia sets up the plotline of Qiao traveling to the Three Gorges construction site only as a starting point to the other parts of China. This interconnection of the Three Gorges to other geographic regions of China echoes with Chinese film scholar Jiaya Mi's

argument for the centrality of the river regions in water-themed Chinese films as a symbolic representation of the larger nation:

Water-themed films are essentially topographical in that they are place-oriented, focusing on a specific region, locality, space, and community. They represent a kind of Jamesonian “cognitive mapping” of China’s ecological and environmental topoi (place and places), a cinematographical navigation of how identity is ecologically mediated not only by a connectedness between one’s primary places but also by the tentacular radiations of the places from each other.<sup>24</sup>

Accordingly, Qiao’s express railway travel reflects Jia’s intention of demonstrating that massive infrastructural constructions are being carried out in other parts of China besides the Three Gorges region. *Ash Is Purest White*’s narrative reference to China’s express railway connects other parts of the country to the Three Gorges Dam as China’s river region through the imageries of UFO sightings.

Therefore, it is plausible to argue that the same UFO appears in both Jia’s “Three Gorges films.” In *Still Life*, the UFO signifies the overwhelming sensation of experiencing the Three Gorges’ mass construction. In *Ash Is Purest White*, the travel trajectory of this UFO extends to other parts of China in parallel with Qiao’s travel on the medium of express railway, which also embodies her psychological journey of feeling disoriented, displaced, and betrayed by people she wants to trust. Immediately after the UFO’s disappearance in *Ash Is Purest White*, the frame cuts to another computerized imagery of Xinjiang’s starry night; this starry night imagery lasts for about twenty seconds, resembling a hypnotic, dreamlike meditation as the postlude of Qiao’s

<sup>24</sup> Jiayan Mi, "Framing Ambient *Unheimlich*: Ecogedon, Ecological Unconscious, and Water Pathology in New Chinese Cinema." In *Chinese Ecocinema*, edited by Sheldon H. Lu and Mi Jiayan (q.v.), 17–38. 25.



extraterrestrial encounter. This computerized imagery of the starry night serves as a transitional visual between the surrealistic moment of Qiao's UFO sighting and the film's next scene of presenting China's railway infrastructure. Within this computerized transitional visual, Jia provides a self-reflexive space for the audience to perceive their own subjective, personal sense of unreality towards the reality of living in post-socialist China.

In *Still Life*, the next scene to Hong's UFO sighting takes place at one of the Three Gorges' construction sites. Here in *Ash Is Purest White*, the next scene is shot from a high angle, which presents a bird's-eye view of an express railway train permeating the screen at a fast speed from left to right; the diagonal, white railway's movement is shown to completely pierce the flat, grey-and-green body of the plain. This stark visual contrast of colors and dimensions juxtaposes the speedy railway train against the still background of the natural landscape. Furthermore, the express railway's fast, piercing movement is coordinated with the UFO's fast, piercing movement in the film. Therefore, the sense of unreality toward China's infrastructural construction in *Ash Is Purest White* is delivered by the accordance of the surrealistic UFO imagery with the express railway train's permeating visual.

After this sweeping visual of the express railway, the film proceeds onto its third narrative segment in which Qiao has already settled back into her hometown in Shanxi Province's Datong city for over a decade. She has returned here after her UFO sighting in Xinjiang, as presented at the end of the second narrative segment. Bin also ends up coming back to Datong, after an accident puts him in a wheelchair for the rest of his life. Qiao decides to take care of him in her teahouse, a business she has successfully established and owned. She decides to care for Bin not because she still trusts and loves him, but out of pity and a sense of responsibility. *Ash Is Purest White*'s narrative regarding the failed relationship between Qiao and

Bin reflects the larger general turmoil in Chinese people's daily life, as well as their sense of insecurity and instability toward partnerships and human connections. Instead, they prioritize the advancement of economic income and social status, which is the reason why Bin had abandoned Qiao. He chose to pursue a better material life by finding a new girlfriend after he got out of prison, who is the sister of a rich corporate CEO.

Hometowns and neighborhoods of many Chinese people are changing and vanishing; so are their trust and faith in interpersonal relationships. The destruction of the hometowns brings unexpected disruptions in personal relationships, because people have to move and travel in search of new livelihoods, and thus become further displaced and disoriented. Juxtaposed with this reality of change and uncertainty is Jia's cinematic theme of Chinese people's "searching" for stability and certainty represented in Qiao's previous "searching" for Bin. However, Bin's denial and rejection of Qiao symbolically negates the validity of such "searching" and affirms the futility of trying to find the certainty of human connection in an ever-changing China. Jia's realism becomes profound not by simply depicting the actual reality, but by diving into the poetics of Chinese individuals' psychological wound within post-socialist China's reality. This narrative expansion of "searching" reveals not only the destroyed geographic landscapes but also the vast, ever-changing economic and sociopolitical landscapes of post-socialist China.

The erasure of Chinese people's faith in interpersonal relationships amidst disorienting economic and societal changes is symbolically represented in *Ash Is Purest White*'s reference to Hong Kong gangster cinema. In *Still Life*, Jia dug into this psyche and perception by presenting the character Xiao Ma's resorting to Hong Kong gangster cinema as a mental and psychological escape. In comparison, Jia incorporates this reference more seamlessly into *Ash Is Purest White* from the very start, where Qiao and Bin realistically lived a gangster life in mainland China.

However, Jia depicts Bin just like Xiao Ma in one particular aspect, that they are both avid fans of Hong Kong gangster films. Bin also repetitively watches gangster films, the most noticeable of which is *A Better Tomorrow*, starring Chow Yun-fat and directed by John Woo in 1986.

In *Ash Is Purest White*, brief scenes of Bin watching these films are intercut and inserted throughout this narrative segment. Represented by Woo's *A Better Tomorrow*, these gangster films always end with the protagonists' tragic, violent deaths fated and foreshadowed from the films' beginning. As such, from *Still Life* to *Ash Is Purest White*, Jia consolidates Chinese individuals' psychological experience with their lived reality by symbolizing Hong Kong gangster cinema as the tragedy, entrapment, and symbolic death of their individual agency and interpersonal connection. They tend to sacrifice their individual agency and interpersonal connection to catch up with the state's all-too-fast economic agenda that requires Chinese people to prioritize materialistic advancement over their emotional needs and humane care for each other.

After experiencing the betrayal of her partner and the irresolution of her travel to find a new life, Qiao still has her hometown to return to as her last resort. However, this ending of *Ash Is Purest White* signifies an ironic contrast with and thus further renders post-socialist China's reality depicted throughout *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White*. This post-socialist Chinese reality is centered by the demolition of Chinese people's communities and the displacement of the Chinese population, which are irreversible and unstoppable because of the state's compulsory developmental policy. The developmental agenda of the CCP's political leadership requires the progress of societal change and migration, while ordinary Chinese people, unlike Qiao in *Ash Is Purest White*, end up being without their homes to go back to. In both of his "Three Gorges

films,” Jia’s reality of post-socialist China is *development from destruction*, marching toward a given future of the nation state being continuously developed and destroyed.

## **Conclusion**

Both of Jia Zhangke’s “Three Gorges films” explore the individual characters’ personal stories according to the detailed realities of their lived experiences across the depths of changes; furthermore, these personal narratives are projected onto the broader post-socialist Chinese society undergoing the CCP’s infrastructural and economic agenda. Not only do these films explore the inner psyche of Chinese individuals conflicting with the CCP’s compulsory policy, but they also demonstrate Jia as a contemporary Chinese director’s clear vision of what is happening among the nation state’s reforms and changes on a macro level. In its analysis of *Still Life* and *Ash Is Purest White*, this thesis borrowed Lydia Liu’s notions of “modern individualism” and “national character” as they clash in post-socialist Chinese society to emphasize the massive displacement of local people in the Three Gorges region due to the CCP’s state-led large-scale construction agenda. In terms of the films’ aesthetics, they focused on the incorporation of computerized UFO imageries as an effective tool to express the unreal-ness of Chinese citizens’ lived experiences and its psychological impact.

In addition, the scenes of UFO sightings take place within the narrative segments where both films’ female protagonists go to the Three Gorges region to look for their estranged partners. Surely, the details within these Three Gorges narrative segments are not completely identical, and the respective female protagonists Hong and Qiao are indeed disparate characters. However, their similarities and differences both speak to the same experiences of displacement and disorientation caused by the massive infrastructural construction undertaken by the CCP in

contemporary Chinese society. In *Still Life*, Hong presents a confused facial expression throughout her witness of the UFO. In comparison, in *Ash Is Purest White*, Qiao starts to smile from a pleasant surprise as soon as she sees the UFO's white light flashing behind the clouds of Xinjiang's night sky. Thus, Qiao is characterized with more agency and confidence in the sense of unreality from the UFO sighting, which in turn signifies that she is a more powerful figure in dealing with post-socialist China's disorientation. However, there is still substantial overlap and similarity between the story and character setups starring Jia's own wife Zhao Tao. Therefore, it feels as if Jia is paying tribute to his own film in the pivotal segment of *Ash Is Purest White* by reimagining the narrative of *Still Life*'s female protagonist.

In terms of the representation of female protagonists in each film, it would be a fruitful endeavor to analyze the two films from a feminist perspective. In *Still Life*, Hong's husband abandoned her and avoids her when she tries to find him; the same situation happens in *Ash Is Purest White* when Qiao travels to the Three Gorges region to look for Bin, who also avoids her. However, while *Still Life* ends with Hong's reticent acceptance of her husband's rejection, Qiao's story does not end with Bin's avoidance of her. Throughout *Ash Is Purest White*'s three narrative segments following Qiao's personal journey, it seems that Jia intentionally presents a contrast between Qiao and Bin. Jia presents an expose of Bin's male characterization of evading interpersonal responsibility in pursuit of material gain, following the state's economic agenda. In contrast, Qiao rises out of Bin's betrayal and in turn gains independence and growth from this failed relationship, as well as courage in launching a lone journey of self-discovery, despite her psychological wound left by the disorienting transitions and changes in post-socialist China. In the end, she still takes on the responsibility of taking care of Bin as he becomes disabled. In this sense, Qiao's character in *Ash Is Purest White* represents Jia's cinematic development of the

strong Chinese female figure of individual self-agency as the resistance to the CCP's compulsory political current commanding ordinary Chinese people.

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