

# Dilemma in an Era of Change: Place and Space in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life* and *The World*

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**Abstract** In the course of modernization, China has been witnessing rapid industrialization and urbanization, which is undoubtedly built on the unprecedented transformation of the physical world, and has in turn greatly impacted the lives of the Chinese and their sense of place and space. Contemporary Chinese, when compared with their ancestors, have obtained much greater freedom enabled by enhanced mobility and extended space. On the other hand, more space brings them, other than freedom and widened horizon, feelings of being uprooted and thus of estrangement from their ancestral and spiritual home. Jia Zhangke has captured this dilemma with which contemporary Chinese are faced in his two films: *The World* (2004) and *Still Life* (2006). Following Yi-fu Tuan's place-space framework, this paper examines how the four protagonists, namely, Zhao Xiaotao and Cheng Taisheng in *The World*, and San Ming, the coal miner, and Shen Hong, the nurse in *Still Life*, experience the overwhelming transformation in their lives, brought out by the country's deep plunge into industrialization and urbanization. I thereby argue that Jia Zhangke's combined use of documentary and surreal elements skillfully presents Chinese people's dilemma in the era of transformation and critical changes.

**Key words** Jia Zhangke; place; space; *The World*; *Still Life*

Over the past three decades, China has been transforming herself from an agricultural economy to an increasingly industrialized and urbanized country. There is no doubt that the rapid industrialization and urbanization is built on the unprecedented transformation of the physical world, which, undoubtedly, greatly impacted the lives of Chinese people and their sense of place and space. In his now classic book *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, Yi-fu Tuan, the famous cultural geographer, fully and clearly explains two interdependent yet paradoxical human desires in embracing place and space: place is security, space is freedom; we are attached to the one and long for the other (3). Before the onset of nationwide industrialization and

urbanization, most Chinese were farmers, and were deeply rooted in their hometown. The rapid industrialization and globalization has greatly enhanced their mobility and contributed to the expansion of their living space. The current Chinese, when compared with their ancestors, can thus enjoy more freedom in moving around. On the other hand, more space brings them, other than real freedom and widened horizon, the feelings of being uprooted and of estrangement from their original self and, their ancestral and spiritual home. The internationally acclaimed filmmaker Jia Zhangke well captured the dilemma that contemporary Chinese are faced with in his two films: *The World* (2004) and *Still Life* (2006). While the former follows a family of Shanxi migrants into a theme park called “The World” in Beijing and tracks the painful personal encounters of these migrants in the metropolitan city, the latter depicts how the construction of the world-famous Three Gorges Dam has dramatically shaped the life of two families from different classes. Using Yi-fu Tuan’s place-space framework, this paper examines how the four protagonists, namely, Zhao Xiaotao and Cheng Taisheng in *The World*, and the coal miner San Ming and the nurse Shen Hong in *Still Life*, experienced the overwhelming tremors and trepidations in their lives, brought about by the country’s giddy pace of modernization and urbanization.

### **Space and Place in the Chinese Context**

As has been mentioned above, Yi-fu Tuan contends that place and space seem to stand in opposition to each other but actually stand for the two paradoxical desires of human beings since they seek attachment and freedom at the same time. He writes: “We have a sense of space because we can move” (118), and “space [being] transformed into place acquires definition and meaning” (136). Although the attachment to the homeland is a universal phenomenon, the increased mobility of modern people decreases their sense of place since it generally takes time to know a place. Tuan also points out,

Space is a common symbol of freedom in the Western world. Space lies open; it suggests the future and invites action. On the negative side, space and freedom are a threat. A root meaning of the word “bad” is “open.” To be open and free is to be exposed and vulnerable. Open space has no trodden paths and signposts. It has no fixed pattern of established human meaning; it is like a blank sheet on which meaning may be imposed. Enclosed and humanized space is place. Compared to space, place is a calm center of established values. Human lives are a dialectical movement between shelter and venture, attachment and freedom. (54)

Thus while the term “place” can be associated with the past, established values, shelter, safety, and attachment, the word “space” is related to future, no established values, venture, risks, and freedom. This independent yet interdependent relationship between space and place is universal in human nature, but from the comparative perspective, Chinese had the deeper attachment to their place rather than space when compared with Westerners.

The reasons are as follows: first of all, from a philosophical perspective, both Confucianism and Taoism in China advocate being attached to one's place. For instance, in Confucianism, the term *jia* (家, home/household/family) is the key concept. Considered the smallest social unit of the society, *jia* is much more valued than the individual being. Confucius holds that even *guojia* (国家, the whole country) should be managed like a *jia*. While in English the two words “home” and “family” are used to mean the physical dwellings and the emotionally-knit family with a child respectively, *jia* in Chinese can mean both, that is to say, there is no division between the emotional home and the physical home. The stability of *jia* used to be highly valued. Thus there is the saying that “when parents are alive, children are not supposed to leave them”(父母在, 不远游). In addition, the ideal of the simple and sedentary life is stated in the Taoist classic *Tao Te Ching*. It says: “Reduce the size and population of the state....Though adjoining states are within the sight of one another, and the sound of dogs barking and cocks crowing in one state can be heard in another, yet the people of one state will grow old and die without having had any dealings with those of another” (142). Secondly, in terms of mode of economy, farming has been the dominant one. Compared with the West that started as nomadic countries, China has been an agrarian country since ancient times, resulting in the fact that the former would move from one place to another while the latter used to be rooted in one place, that is, one's home or hometown.

For the past three decades, China has embarked on the road of industrializing and urbanizing, giving rise to the fact that millions of people, voluntarily or involuntarily, leave their home places, go on unfamiliar journeys and end up in the seemingly enlarged spaces that have been created by industrialization and urbanization. The physical transformation of one's hometown may result in the loss of their ancestral and spiritual home. To put it simply, if their physical home is knocked down, where are they to resettle their ancestral root and spiritual home? Thus the sense of “placelessness” or “uprootedness” appears widespread and acute in today's China during the Reform Era in which manufactured landscapes are constantly emerging. It is no exaggeration to say that the unprecedented alteration of the physical world is coupled with an inescapable displacement of people's sense of home place, and subsequently the total erasure of their ancestral roots as a spiritual home.

### Place and Space in *The World and Still Life*

Written and directed by Jia Zhangke, *The World* is mainly set in an actual theme park located in Beijing, that is, Beijing World Park, which displays a gala of replicas, albeit at reduced scale, of iconic landmarks found all over the world for park visitors and “accidental” tourists. The film tells the story of two migrant workers employed by the World Park: Zhao Xiaotao (Xiaotao), a dance entertainer, and Chen Taisheng (Taisheng), Xiaotao’s boyfriend, who works as security guard. As young people from the rural area of Shanxi Province, they come to pursue their shared dream of leading a better and freer life in the metropolis. Just as the theme park brings the rest of the world home to the park visitors, their jobs seem to lay a short-cutting path to the end of realizing their dream.

In this film, we can see clearly how migrant workers negotiate with the unfamiliar living environment — the simulated park space spreads farther and wider than their hometown. Accustomed to being confined to their small hometown, the couple of lovers seem to have obtained much greater freedom since they arrived in search of jobs in Beijing, one of the world’s largest cities, but actually they have been confined to their working place, which, ironically, is the mimicry of the whole world. Although the logos of the park are “See the world without ever leaving Beijing” and “Give me one day, I’ll give you the whole world,” this “world” is not the real one, but merely a midget replica of the world-famous buildings that are used to create a fantasized *simulacrum* for the unsuspecting tourists.

Such is the world that those migrant workers are living in day in and day out. Take Xiaotao’s case for example: talking to her boyfriend on the phone while riding on a mono-rail train, she is feigning to tour around the land of “India”. But this tour in a theme park gives her none of the genuine thrill of touring around the real world, and has left her the feeling that “being stuck here will turn me into a ghost.” Thus more space for those migrant workers might mean more alienation between them, and more uncertainties for their future. It is deeply ironic that mobility in such space has led to joy-killing suffocation.

In the film, Director Jia combines the use of real-life elements with surreal mimics, to accentuate the sharp contrast between fantasy and reality in the life of those migrant workers. In other words, the cinematic images project a world which is both real and yet illusory. For one thing, the fictional setting and characters of *The World* masquerade real people in real places. The film was partially shot at the actual “World Park” in Beijing as well as at the “Windows of the World” in Shenzhen. Many characters on the cast are not played by professionals, but undertrained amateurs. For instance, Xiaotao, the female lead in the film, used to be a dance teacher in a Shanxi

high school; Sanming, the male lead who was to play the major role in *Still Life*, is Jia's cousin, a motivated but untrained first-time actor. The duo, for most of the film's length, speak Shanxi dialect rather than mandarin Chinese. All those arrangements are intended to create the sense of the real. For another, Director Jia's realist or naturalist method of storytelling allows actors' "emotions to develop fully in the natural course of time" (qtd. in Gatenaio 26). In Jia's own words, "My way of filming allows me to describe Chinese reality without distortion" (qtd. in Gatenaio 26). These documentary-like elements give added weight to the film's critical representation of contemporary China as it grapples with ups and downs of globalization experience.

But Director Jia's creative use of the symbolic images, no matter real or surreal, enhances the irony and the paradox in those migrant workers' life. Xiaotao's craving for mobility and freedom is effectively illustrated through animated sequences that further underscore the impossibility of ever satiating such desires. As Tuan points out, the airplanes can extend man's freedom and space (53), but in the film, the airplane symbolizes the alarming chasm between the mundane reality and the migrant workers' longing for freedom. For instance, there is a sequence in which Xiaotao has the fantasy of becoming a flight attendant in uniform, flying like a bird in the sky over the Beijing city. In the following dialogue between Er Guniang and Xiaotao, it can be seen clearly that the airplane is something that they can watch flying by but can never actually be riding in, for air travel is so far beyond their financial reach. Take a look at the following dialogue between them:

Er Guniang: Sister Tao, who flies on the planes?

Xiaotao: Who knows — I don't know anybody who has ever been on a plane.

On the surface, they have immersed themselves in the "world", but the reality is that they have to struggle to survive, for nothing in the theme world park really belongs to them. In another scene, Xiaotao and Taisheng are seen riding on a simulated flying magic carpet against which the park's monuments are the backdrop. Even as they hope to escape the park's confines and cruel reality, "the migrant workers are virtual prisoners and the freedom they do experience is only fleeting and imaginary, albeit pleasurable" (Gatenaio 28).

As entertainers of the park on the side, the job of these characters is to help create a fantasy for audience. They wear different fancy costumes on the stage, but when they go backstage, the place where they changes clothes are simply messy and crowded, no better than a disorderly warehouse; the dorms in basement where they live look just like underground cells. Yet they cannot find any means or ways to change their situation because of their poverty and limited mobility. Thus the feeling

of uprootedness among migrant workers is acute. As Gatenaio notes,

the park's migrant workers illustrate the uprooting of people from place according to the logics of global capital flows and labor market mechanisms, as well as the intangible quest for modernity, whereas the theme park itself depicts the global circulation of iconic places (e.g., the Leaning Tower of Pisa), and their symbolic meanings, via their replication in miniature for tourist consumption. (26)

This uprootedness is all the more acute when we see the sharp contrast between workers' dull workaday lives, their marginalization in the metropolis, their meager accommodations in basement dormitories and the images of leisure, wealth, and travel projected by the theme park for tourist consumption. Thus those migrant workers have become, paradoxically, the most visible yet invisible people. While most people applaud the great benefits engendered by the increasing globalization in China over the past three decades, Jia Zhangke is sensitive enough to capture the ambivalence of those migrant workers in face of globalization, and the great tensions between their pursuit of freedom and prosperity on the one hand, and their marginalized and hopeless situation on the other hand.

The seemingly globalized living environment thus brings them the great anxieties and even distrust for each other. As a traditional-minded girl, Xiaotao refuses to have premarital sex with her boyfriend Taisheng. When she is finally convinced to lose her virginity to him, she accidentally discovers that Taisheng has betrayed her. In the end, Taisheng and Tao have succumbed to the gas leak, in their friends' apartment. There is suspense about whether the gas leak is a real accident or man-made one. From my perspective, it is more inclined towards a premeditated one, since for Xiaotao, on her part, only death could help her regain a peaceful mind. As the film fades to black, Taisheng's voice asks, "Are we dead?" "No," Tao's voice responds, "this is only the beginning." At once, sexually consummated but life terminated, their death together seems to cleanse their disoriented past and symbolize their journey returning to their original selves.

Director Jia expresses his original intention in shooting the film as follows:

In *The World*, I was trying to address the rapid change transforming China — it seems that China is opening up and that there's a promise of a new life, of new technologies, but actually this economic development is causing people to become even lonelier and more alienated. It's this contradiction that I'm trying to explore: with more openness and more economic development, there's actually

more alienation among the people. (qtd. in Rapfogel 46)

The death of Xiaotao and Taisheng ties a symbolic knot for their tragic fate, and of returning to the past. Xiaotao, being cheated by Taisheng and by the reality as well, cannot really adapt herself to the new environment. What she chooses to do is poisoning herself. The ending of the film seems to imply Jia's pessimistic attitude towards the reality of those migrant workers, especially female ones. The concept of "space" in this film is thus related to metropolis, globalization, air travel, etc. However, the seemingly extended space for those migrant workers is illusory and deceiving. What is really related to the illusory space is marginalization, distrust, and alienation, etc. In his next film *Still Life*, Jia seems to provide one more choice for his audience, that is, to adjust oneself to the new changing reality, since life has to go on.

### ***Still Life***

In face of drastic changes in life, people generally have two attitudes towards them. One is to be brave enough to say farewell to the past, and adapts oneself to the new reality. The other is to cling to the past, and to strive to return to it. Director Jia's films have addressed the challenges of industrialization and urbanization in current China. Different from the absolute pessimism in *The World*, Jia seems to be more open-minded about the changes brought about by the large-scale transformation of the physical world in current China in *Still Life* (三峡好人; literally "Good people of the Three Gorges"). Shot in an old village of Fengjie, a small town on the Yangtze River which is slowly being destroyed by the building of the Three Gorges Dam, *Still Life* tells the story of two people in search of their estranged spouses. The film premiered at the 2006 Venice Film Festival and was a winner of the Golden Lion Award for Best Film. In this film, Jia continues with his documentary-format style. His cousin Sanming, who was just cast only a minor role in *The World*, is now the male protagonist in *Still Life*. The Three Gorges Project, as the largest hydroelectric project in the world and one of the biggest transformative alterations of the physical world, involves the removal and relocation of more than one million local residents. Thus it is safe to say that it has greatly impacted people's lives in various aspects and in different ways. It has also altered people's attitudes towards the concept of place or home. To some extent, it can be said that, as a miniature spatial displacement, it symbolizes the destruction of the old place or old hometown and the opening of a new chapter in Chinese historical development. In face of the large-scale terrestrial alteration, how do ordinary Chinese break up with their familiar lived habitats? And with their cultural past? Obviously they would have to find the comparable space, external as well internal, to fill up the gaping void left of their place attachment, but

how are they able to do that?

In *Still Life*, Director Jia has genuinely captured the drastic impact made by the Three Gorges Project on ordinary people's lives. It was Liu Xiaodong, a famous contemporary Chinese artist, who triggered Jia's interest in filming on the Three Gorges. The first time when Jia visited the Three Gorges, he was following Liu Xiaodong as the latter invited Jia to film him while he painted a group of laborers near the Three Gorges Dam. But when Jia saw the large-scale demolition of old cities such as Fengjie, and felt how local people's lives had been affected, he decided to shoot a film about it. He says,

When I was making *Still Life*, what I first saw was a site of destruction, a two-thousand-year-old city that was destroyed in two years leaving a sense of void and emptiness. But at the same time, the people are still going about their daily lives — which is evidence of a strong life force. So there's a sense of contradiction between destruction and an ongoing urge to live. (qtd. in Rapfogel 47)

Fengjie the old town in this film symbolizes the past and history. The construction of the Three Gorges Dam has engendered a blanket demolition of local residence areas, alteration of the administrative infrastructure, and the slow recovery of people's emotional bonding to the newly constructed place.

*Still Life* fields two threads of plot development, featuring two main characters. One is Sanming, a coal miner, the other is Shen Hong, a nurse. Both come to Fengjie, a city that would be soon be flooded by the rising water level of the damming of Yangtze, to search for estranged spouses. Sanming's wife whom he had married as a mail bride left him 16 years ago. Sanming is told that his wife's former home had now been flooded by the ever-expanding dam construction, and that she had been away to Yichang helping on a passenger ship. When Sanming finally finds his wife, he has the intention to bring her back to his hometown. Shen Hong, on the other hand, makes up her mind to propose a divorce with her husband, who had not contacted her for two years, and who had lived together with his lover named Ding Yaling. Shen Hong tells him that she fell in love with someone else.

In Jia's opinion, *Still Life* aims to teach people how to make choices when confronted by life-altering changes in our times.

When I was making *Still Life*, I realized that China's ongoing open economic policy has reached its fruition — the allocation of resources is complete. But the reality is that people don't realize how much disruption there has been of the

past and of history. And people in China have to realize that they need to know how to proceed, to continue to lead their lives. *Still Life* is actually about making choices, especially in the case of the two protagonists, choices they have to make so they can become freer. (qtd. in Rapfogel 46)

Sanming and Shen Hong are from two different social classes, but the problems they are faced with are quite similar. Both come to Fengjie to make a final decision. But their choices are dramatically different. One is striving to bring back his estranged wife, while the other is trying desperately to find her absentee husband before starting her life with somebody else. As their problems are caused by the damming at the Three Gorges, their lives have been totally changed. But they differ in their attitudes towards the changes. Sanming desperately wants to revert back to his lost youth, and clings to a treasured past, while Shen Hong, having endured a painful separation, has made up her mind to break up with the unfaithful husband, and re-starts her own life in Shanghai. So the two threads of dénouement reveal divergent attitudes towards their lived habitats, the paradox between attachment and freedom, change and resistance.

Sanming's clinging to the past is manifested in various aspects. For instance, he still keeps the address (5 Granite Street of Fengjie Country) that his wife left to him sixteen years ago, and only finds out that it had been already erased by the flooding. The ring tone of his cellphone is "Blessed Good-Hearted People", which ironically was held as one of the most popular songs one decade ago. So when Fengjie, "a city with two thousand years' history was demolished in just 2 years," the nostalgic Sanming is still unwilling to reconcile himself with the reality. Brother Mark, a young local guy Sanming has befriended with, expresses his nostalgia this way: "We remember our past. The present-day society doesn't suit us ... because we're too nostalgic." In reality, however, Old Fengjie has gone forever while New Fengjie is still under construction. Many local residents, including Sanming's absent wife, have left for bigger cities to seek job opportunities in the hope of becoming rich. In fact, Fengjie has already, to some extent, become a money-oriented, desire-driven space. From the motorcycle-taxi drivers, to the fake magician on the passenger ship, people have been trying various means to make money. Even the teenager girl, who wants to become a babysitter, begs Shen Hong to take her away to the outside world. So with the demolition of the old residential buildings, the established moral rules such as mutual trust and honesty seem to have perished as well. The city reduced to rubble has become just another landmark of moral degradation.

When China stands at a crossroad of dramatic change, people are apt to struggle with, and even become overwhelmed by the need to cope with forces of change. These changes come out of destruction of the old and the past, which, to Director Jia,

is a saddening fact. But at the same time, the passing of the old gives birth to new hope and the chance of making it happen. Jia says, “Of course there’s a great sadness here: a two-thousand-year-old memory has just been erased, there’s a sense of loss. But this has also ignited my imagination — it has led me to think about what is going to happen next, about the future. So I imagined the scene of a UFO flying away ...” (qtd. in Rapfogel 46). Unlike Sanming, the nurse Shen Hong has already made up her mind to rid herself of the estranged husband for she does not want to be stuck in the past. She is resolute in using the hammer to smash open the lock on the door of her husband’s office. Being prepared for the changes in her life, she is determined to put her past behind her. Thus for her, the expansion of space enables her to be more mobile and independent.

Director Jia has created a striking sequence of these surreal moments to underscore Shen Hong’s determination in embracing the enlarged space. Such moments include a UFO flying across the horizon of the Yangtze River, a monument to the Three Gorges Dam blasting off like a space rocket and the final shot of a tight rope walker passing from the top of one condemned building to the next. Thus space symbolizes freedom, hope, and rebirth. As Robinson points out, “Jia seems to be reminding us that there will always be other ways of imagining, and representing spatial dimensions, and that the place identities that frame social life need to be reconceived and re-politicized in ways that draw attention to the immaterial and relational processes that define their moments of emplacement and displacement” (118).

As for why there are two intertwined narratives of one focusing on the male and the other on female, Jia offers this explanation: “In China there’s a cultural tradition that regards men and women as the yin and yang of the culture — they form the basic make-up of the human society. The movie is about destruction, about a site of destruction, but it’s also about a new beginning, so it made me think about having these yin and yang elements in the make-up of this new beginning” (qtd. in Rapfogel 47). So it can be seen clearly that Jia is more like a present-day Taoist, i.e., by way of getting rid of the utter pessimism he has infused in the film *The World*. While applauding the great achievements brought about by the completion of the Three Gorges Dam, we should not forget that the great impact that it has made on the lives of those people as represented in the characterization of Sanming and Shen Hong.

## Conclusion

In times of earthshattering changes, how to embrace the changes poses a big challenge. The destruction of the old places and the globalization of the entire nation seem to be the inevitable outcome of modernization and urbanization. As is analyzed,

Jia Zhangke has focused on how those changes impacted ordinary Chinese, especially, the lives of the rural people. The use of the real and surreal elements in his two films signifies the paradoxical relationship between place and space, between security and freedom, and between loss and rebirth. When the old and familiar places symbolizing the established values have been demolished, and when the expansion of space makes it possible for people to move to new places, the critical issue is the possibility and ability to familiarize oneself with the new places, and turn a new chapter in one's life. While we are applauding the great achievements accomplished over the past decades, Jia reminds us of the necessity to heed the emotional and psychological casualty and loss that the destruction of the old might have inflicted on the psyche of ordinary Chinese. In *The World*, Jia suggests that it is essential to help those marginalized social beings gain access to the freedom created by the newly-formed space, and to raise their sense of belonging to such new habitats. In *Still Life*, he is more hopeful in the spiritual rebirth after the destruction of the old, for life has to go on. The great values of Jia's two films lie in that he has displayed genuine concern about the fate of those ordinary people.

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