

## Original Paper

# Reflections on Transitional Society through Marginal Figures in the Films of China's Sixth Generation Directors

Haige Cui<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Ningbo, China

\* Haige Cui, University of Nottingham Ningbo China, Ningbo, China

Received: July 23, 2024

Accepted: July 31, 2024

Online Published: August 10, 2024

doi:10.22158/csm.v7n2p92

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/csm.v7n2p92>

### Abstract

*There is a controversial situation for Sixth Generation directors in China that their films are celebrated by international film festivals, but the majority of them are banned domestically. Their films deeply reflect and critique the transitional era of China, moving from socialist society with planned economy to postsocialist society with market economy. This article examines two representative films—Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* (1998) and Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000)—to analyse the shared characteristics of Sixth Generation directors. Despite differing in style, with Jia's film perceived as documentary-like and Lou's as melodramatic, both directors highlight societal flaws and class polarization. Through detailed analysis of the film contents and filming strategies, author argues that both directors critique current societal issues, show sympathy for the marginal and express nostalgia for traditional moral standards, which make their work contentious to Chinese authority.*

### Keywords

*China's Sixth Generation directors, Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye, Xiao Wu, Suzhou River, the marginal*

### 1. Introduction

China's Sixth Generation cinema indicates a significant global filmmaking period, but it is also a complex situation regarding the contradicted foreign reception and domestic official acceptance. There is a predicament of Sixth Generation films that they are welcomed abroad, especially at foreign film festivals, but the public delivery of many Sixth Generation films in China is persistently banned by censorship. One reason is that the expression of Sixth Generation is opposite, even offensive, to Chinese mainstream ideology. Sixth Generation directors perform the present on screen directly, insisting on exposing the ugly truth of reality from their perspective, revealing the drawbacks of society and showing sympathy for the marginal.

Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye are two representative directors of Sixth Generation, although their filmmaking styles are different. Wang (2014) states that Lou and Jia have seemingly opposite shooting strategies, because Jia emphasizes the distance between character and camera on his screen to maintain a realistic style, while the production of Lou is more stylist and dramatic. However, the common elements they share performed in films are their cares and responses to the current social situation. They both use cinematic approach to present time and space to indicate Chinese present and history, filmic representation and reality (Wang, 2014), narrating the injustice of the society through “a grey person in a grey nation” (Corliss, 2001, as cited in Cornelius and Smith, 2002a).

In this article, *Xiao Wu* (1998) directed by Jia Zhangke and *Suzhou River* (2000) directed by Lou Ye are selected for a detailed analysis. *Xiao Wu* wins the Wolfgang Staudte Award and Netpac Award at Berlin International Film Festival held in 1998 (IMDb, n.d.a), and it gains praises from several film reviews about the skillful techniques of Jia and the well performance of a young man’s struggle facing social disapproval (Gelder, 1999; White, 1999), but this film is banned in China because it was sent to foreign film festivals without announcing domestic film authority and acquiring their permission (Liang, 2022), so *Xiao Wu* turns to an underground film. Similarly, *Suzhou River* gains the Grand Prix at Paris Film Festival and Tiger Award at Rotterdam International Film Festival held in 2000 (IMDb, n.d.b), and film reviews claim that this is a compelling and sensitive love story, with a unique gritty texture, a coolly atmosphere and its own freshness (Rooney, 2000; Thomson, 2000; Turan, 2000), but it is also banned domestically because of the same reason as *Xiao Wu*. The main characters in their films are the marginal, who are nobodies, and their lives are trivial to the general picture of whole society in the transitional era. *Xiao Wu* is the name of a failed pocket-picker in Jia’s film, and in Lou’s film, the protagonists are a videographer, a bar performer, a drug delivery and an adolescent girl, wandering on the street without purpose. They are all “grey people”.

*Xiao Wu* is the second feature-length film project of Jia Zhangke (after *Xiaoshan Going Home* released in 1995), and it is the first story of his home trilogy (the other two are *Platform* in 2000 and *Unknown Pleasures* in 2002). *Suzhou River* is the third feature-length film of Lou Ye, after *Don’t Be Young* (1994) and *Weekend Lover* (1995). These two films were produced at an early career stage of both directors, which reveal directors’ authentic concern and sincere interpretation to society, and their natural and spontaneous aesthetic preference. Through analysing these two early works of them, the similar motif of their films about the effect of turbulent society to the marginal and the narrative pattern they use to construct cinematic story can be discovered. Therefore, these two selected films can be regarded as a trigger to understand these two directors as China’s Sixth Generation directors, in terms of their attitude to the current society and the marginal living in it.

This article argues that the way, in which Sixth Generation directors perceive and perform the chaotic society, showing their care to the marginal who are not accepted by the social mainstream, causes the

controversial feature of their films. The operation of the filmmaking strategy reveals the perspective of directors to reality, through which the drawback of society is highlighted in their films. In the following sections, author will first introduce the background of Sixth Generation directors, and then analyse the two selected films, *Xiao Wu* and *Suzhou River*, in detail to examine why the expression of films are not aligned with official mainstream ideology of government in terms of its thematic expression and filmmaking strategy. Meanwhile, this article illustrates how Sixth Generation directors view their characters with compassion, delivering a common criticism and a sense of confusion to the transitional social environment.

## 2. Context of Sixth Generation Directors

Sixth Generation is used to describe Chinese directors who were born around 1970s and began to shoot films in 1990s. Using generation to settle film classification is a unique criterion in China, which categorizes directors and films in a chronological order. Dai Jinhua (2018, as cited in Bo, 2018) further explains that the construction of generation is formed by the common response of directors to the era they live in. When examining the Sixth Generation films, scholars claim that the common elements directors shared performed in films are realism aesthetic, the changes of the society, and migrants from rural area to urban city (Xu, 2005; Xu, 2007). It shows the care of directors to the social issues and their willingness to expose them, which depends on the unstable social environment they experience.

The Sixth Generation directors are active in 1990s at the turning point of China's society, during which political policy and economic condition both alter. In that period, China undergoes a process of adaptation to integrate into the global context and embrace modernization, transitioning from socialism to postsocialism (Zhang, 2012). However, the changing society faces the uncertainty. With the Tiananmen Incident in 1989 for democracy (Béja, 2011) and the establishment of socialist market economy that the planned economy is replaced by market economy (Zhang, 2012), the traditional communist ideology is challenged. The postsocialist society that ends the Mao's socialist society refers to a distinctive and complex Chinese modernized society, but which struggles with its particular negative social system with cultural diversity, ambiguity and confusion (Pickowicz, 1994). During this time, a significant internal migration from rural regions to urban cities appears, leading to a substantial increase in the waiting-job population, and citizens show a rising expectation for political rights, while the social control governed by the Communist Party of China is still harsh (Cornelius and Smith, 2002a). Zhang Zhen (2007) states that the films produced at that time cooperate with the "destruction and reconstruction of the social fabric and urban identities". Zhang (2010) agrees that urban ruins, as a spatial performance in postsocialist Chinese cinema, indicate the loss of the past and emphasize the reconstruction of the present. Postsocialism constitutes the content and aesthetic performance of projects of Sixth Generation directors (Zhang, 2010), who reflect to their personal experiences and

develop the story of the marginal in developing cities in this changing era.

For Sixth Generation directors, they are sensitive and sympathetic to the outsiders in society, and the representative characters are designed under this complex social context. The Sixth Generation directors are conscious of the issues in Chinese cities because of the undergoing social changes, including “poverty, rising crime and a sense of marginalization” (Cornelius and Smith, 2002b), and the capitalist feature of market economy widening the gap between classes (Dai, 2002, as cited in Zhang, 2010). From western academic perspective, scholars tend to define Sixth Generation film as underground film because of the particular social background that these filmmakers are independent from the state to acquire greater expression freedom from official political control (Pickowicz, 2006). The reforming society and powerless individuals inside this society are recorded by the films of Sixth Generation.

### 3. Recording and Criticizing the Transitional Era

In the selected films, *Xiao Wu* and *Suzhou River*, Jia and Lou both show the concern and reflection shared by Sixth Generation directors towards the current fast changing society. In these films, they perform the challenge of market economy to society and the doubt arising among the marginal in society about traditional morality, with directors’ own judgement and criticism to the current social situation, although the filmmaking styles of Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye are different. In general, the style of Jia Zhangke’s film is realistic, which shows a documentary feeling with handheld camera. While the storyline established by Lou Ye is close to melodrama, with strong emotion expression and conflict creation. However, author argues that their attention to the current social issue requests their ability to capture the authentic reality happening simultaneously while they are making their film projects, no matter recording reality in a documentary style or recording it within a melodrama. The “grey” area where the story happens and the influence on the marginal living in that “grey” zone caused by the pursuit of commercial profit are emphasized by directors.

Jia’s film records the trivial individual’s life in a grand social environment. Jia describes himself as a “migrant worker director (dianying mingong)”, because when he grew up, he had a close relationship with migrant workers (Kwok, 2012), so his films concern about the life of the marginal, revealing their destiny on the screen. Berry (2008, as cited in Chen, 2015b) announces that Jia Zhangke is influenced by Bazin’s realist film theory and the Italian New Realism movement. Without adding a dominating personal interpretation to characters, the interaction between characters and surroundings is captured by his camera (Deppman, 2021; Wang, 2014). Wang (2014) claims that the shots in Jia’s film encourage a subjective initiative observation, through which to “encounter cinematic representations of past and present”. *Xiao Wu* is the first film of his ‘Hometown Trilogy’ serials, which examines the fate of small town and people live in there that left behind during the social transformation (Berry, 2009a). *Xiao Wu*

narrates the tragedy of a pickpocket's life with the implementation of a new policy to reduce crimes by government, and the pickpocket is gradually betrayed by friendship, love and family, and finally caught by a police officer during one theft. Shown by *Xiao Wu*, the protagonist lives in a town of a mixed environment, where the modernized present contains the conventions of the past.

In the story of *Xiao Wu*, happening in 1997—the transitional period of China, camera follows the protagonist Xiao Wu living in this grand social context to discover the social conflict bursting between the old tradition with conventional moral standard and the new world dominated by commodity. The setting of this story is in a small town in Fenyang of Shanxi province, where opportunities and conventions, as well as tradition and modern coexist at the same time. In film, the appearance of this town and social background of the story are exposed by the camera following Xiao Wu. At that time, the Strike Hard Policy is conducted to reduce crime rate, which is shown in film by an official announcement put on the wall, and the old buildings are planned to be removed shown by the authority comes inside an old store to calculate the size of room. Facing the official order of demolishing old buildings, Xiao Wu's friend, also an owner of an old house, asks, "The old building is demolished, but where is the new one?" The old society is being eliminated, but the new social structure has not been established. The story about Xiao Wu happened under this setting. The past represented by crime and old building is being erased, but a better modern society is not fully established yet. With the procedure of modernization, the traditional convention is left behind. This social characteristic is also presented by the different features of Xiao Wu, the protagonist, and Xiao Yong, an old friend of Xiao Wu, and their different value systems.

The first section of the film describes the end of the relationship between two old friends, Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong, because of their opposite choices for their future in the changing era. Xiao Wu is an illegal pickpocket. While his counterpart Xiao Yong becomes a successful entrepreneur, who is ashamed of his previous pickpocket identity. When Xiao Wu knows that Xiao Yong does not invite him to his wedding, Xiao Wu comes to Xiao Yong's house, feeling angry and hurt, but he leaves after hesitation. Afterwards Xiao Yong comes out just as Xiao Wu left, but these two characters miss each other. They do not miss each other for the wedding discussion only, but this indicates that they will miss each other forever because of their different plans for their own future. In this scene, there is a background music, and the words of that music are "The sword is in my hand. I ask who is the hero in the world", generating a question that who would be a hero between Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong in this new era: the one who remembers his old friend, or the one who leaves his old friend behind, but becomes rich and famous to be accepted by the social mainstream.

The behaviours of Xiao Wu and Xiao Yong are guided by their opposite value systems. Xiao Wu is a relatively traditional "hero" character with Chinese classic spirit of "Yi", a chivalrous quality. In the beginning of the film, the wallet of a friend of Xiao Wu's friend is stolen by Xiao Wu's pickpocket

group, so Xiao Wu promises to find the friend's identification card and return it back. He shows his rules that he lives on as a member of a pickpocket group. After that, he leaves all the ID cards in a mailbox to return them after stealing wallets to avoid the inconvenience of people. He keeps the money but returns the ID cards, so in his value system, friend's need is regarded as a priority, but the behaviour of stealing money is just a way to support his life, and he is nothing more than a handicraftsman, as he introduces himself. He is a righteous man, a "hero", under his moral standard. While Xiao Yong refuses the kindness of Xiao Wu to bring him money to celebrate his wedding, because Xiao Yong considers that the source of this money is bad, which is stolen from others. For Xiao Yong, the money related to his new social status and identity is a prior concern. The conflict and difference between them have already existed.

However, the seemingly just and successful job of Xiao Yong is also revealed as illegal. Xiao Yong smuggles tobacco and earns money from female singers in his KTV. Cornelius and Smitha (2002a) criticize the injustice of the contemporary society because the outside world is as corrupt as Xiao Wu's job, and the only difference of Xiao Wu is that he is independent from the official system, so he is not accepted. Berry (2009b) states that the acceptance and praise of Xiao Yong display that "state power sides with economic power". Therefore, the "Yi" of Xiao Wu is negligible when he is labelled as a criminal by the state. The criticism to Xiao Wu and his illegal job spreads widely on radio and TV to strengthen the official ideology of the social developing blueprint. Jia Zhangke (as cited in Liang, 2022) interprets this film himself, saying that "this is a film about our worries and our uneasiness. Having to cope with a dysfunctional society, we take refuge in solitude which is a substitute for dignity." In the end, Xiao Wu is arrested and detained in the police station, and the background music that asks "who is the hero" appears again in the next shot, referring that Xiao Wu is not the hero in current state but just a thief. Director uses an ironic approach to express his disagreement to the unfair social situation.

Compared with the realistic style of Jia Zhangke, Lou Ye tends to create imaginative melodrama. Rooney (2000) mentions that the tone and setting of *Suzhou River* remind him Wang Kar-wai school, which belongs to art house style. *Suzhou River* uses shaky camera and various close-up shots to narrative a complex love story between two couples, and the main storyline is about a man called Mada keeps finding his love, Mudan. This film is narrated by an anonymous person, "I", also a videographer, from a subjective perspective. The narrator of this love story also has a girlfriend, Meimei, who looks the same as Mudan. During the whole story, director does not review the background information of the narrator, so the reliability of him and his narration is doubtful. Meanwhile, the two intertwining storylines, what the narrator experiences with Meimei and what he hears from Meimei about Mada, and the similarity between Meimei and Mudan both create an ambiguous feeling of transferring between fiction and reality. Although the story itself is ambiguous, aiming to confusing audiences about the truth and fiction, the performing way by recording life by narrator directly implies the intention of

director of referring to social reality. The recording feature of this film is announced by the videographer in film, “my camera doesn’t lie”. He also makes another claim as, if the viewers don’t like the video, he is not the person to blame, because his camera doesn’t lie, which indicates that the image captured by camera is authentic to reality, but also may not be pretty.

This film is narrated from the first-person perspective of the videographer, who records the surroundings directly. The design of the camera position as the eye of videographer limits what appears in front of the camera, but also increases the realistic feeling depending on the handheld camera and “on site”. Audiences can observe and feel the disappointing reality that the director experiences directly. At the beginning of the film, multiple scenes of Suzhou River recorded by videographer are edited together, showing the half-demolished buildings, people living on boathouses, an old bridge and a muddy river, with the voiceover, “All the rubbish is piled up here, which makes this river becomes a most dirty river”. The recorded Suzhou River sequence is followed by his “My camera doesn’t lie” statement. This is a real portrait of where this story happens, indicating an ignored backward district of a developing city. Wang (2014) emphasizes that the space of the film should not only be a place but the place. The selection of the setting is considered with unique spatial and temporal meanings, in the half procedure of modernization in Shanghai.

In this film, Lou Ye sets the character under the chaotic and changing social background in a less developed region in Shanghai. When introducing the setting of the story in the opening sequence, the focus in the foreground of shot is the appearance of Suzhou River, while in the background, the modern new buildings and the Oriental Pearl Tower appear in the distance, through which contrast and gap in the society are revealed. The Oriental Pearl Tower is an illusion of a dream world, an advanced and developed area, and a financial success with free market, but it is also a place that the vast majority cannot reach (Feng, 2009; Silbergeld, 2004). The Oriental Pearl Tower locates by the side of the Huangpu River, which is another river running across Shanghai, but much more famous and shining than the Suzhou River, as a CBD (Central Business District). The single image, containing both the Suzhou River and the Oriental Peral Tower besides the Huangpu River, shows two sides of the world, the blurry part of the shot is the bright side of the world where ordinary people cannot arrive, while the other side of the world performed around the Suzhou River is the mundane life the marginal struggle to live.

The gap is obvious between the rich and the poor, but the camera not only exhibits the existence of the gap, in the meantime, with the development of the story, it states that this gap is insurmountable. The social context in that certain time is disordered when people can change their social classes easily by chances and luck, but this coincidental luck cannot last long for normal people. From the description of videographer, Mudan’s father is rich because of smuggling liquor, which is a trade like gamble to earn a huge profit in a short time, but at the end of the film, Mudan is still at the bottom of the society,

working as a salesman in a convenience store. The opportunity to be rich for the underclass is just a transitory enjoyment, but they do not have the ability to fill the gap between the rich and the poor, and they have few abilities and little knowledge to maintain their rich identity.

Other characters in the film also do not own mainstream identities from the start to the end of the story. Mada is a deliveryman, delivering the unknown illegal stuff back and forth in the city, getting involved in underworld business, but the members related to underworld trade end up with either death or being caught by the police. Meimei is a mermaid performer in a bar, but the owner of this bar also has a close relationship with the underworld, punishing people by force. After the illegal bar being sealed up by police, the bar owner is arrested, and Meimei becomes an unemployed vagrant. There is only a definite ban and finality of these old worlds, but no new institutions take over them. As mentioned by Chen (2015a), a vital part of vagrant group in society is formed by unemployment people. Author adds to this statement that there are increasing vagrants generated because of the efforts to eliminate crimes from the old society. Through these characters, the film exhibits the modernizing process of the society, with the collapse of the underworld and the close down of the illegal bar, due to which the marginal all have to face their tragic destinies as outsiders of the society. The recorded reality performed in the film shows that it is hopeless for the marginal to join in the social mobility, and there is no way for them to alter their social status to a higher class.

Both of Jia Zhangke's and Lou Ye's films depict the transitional society in 1990s China through a small town in Shanxi or an undeveloped district of Shanghai. Meanwhile, they both express their concern about the challenge brought to ordinary people by market economy and criticize the increasing class and wealth polarization caused by social changes, through developing story around their protagonists who are left behind and cannot access to the mainstream society. They also use their own way to construct the story, through which they build up an emotional connection between audiences and main characters to strengthen audiences' compassion for them.

#### **4. Showing Sympathy for the Marginal**

It can be seen from the character exhibition in films that Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye not only express their care for the marginal in this complex social context, but they also use filming strategies to generate sympathy from audiences for characters. In *Xiao Wu*, Jia Zhangke narrates three stories happening around Xiao Wu so that audiences could enter the inner world of him and follow his experiences to observe the unfair situation that occurs to him. In *Suzhou River*, Lou Ye situates audiences as observers of the story with the videographer, watching the drama of the lovers happens, but at the same time, questioning and judging this classic romantic story with a sceptical attitude. The accuracy of the love story is not guaranteed, and the traditional opinion of love is also rejected. Although their narrating strategies are not the same, Jia and Lou both establish a path through their films to create a chance for



audiences to link to and communicate with their characters, encouraging audiences to reflect to the current social situation.

In film *Xiao Wu*, the protagonist Xiao Wu does not belong to the mainstream society. His identity is a pickpocket, and he is also a vagrant, wandering on street without any goal or plan for his own future. Vagrant is also known as flâneur, an academic term proposed in French, as city stroller (Lauster, 2007), through whose performance in artwork audiences can perceive the city and the modernity of it (Jenks, 1995). However, Chen (2015a) mentions that the modernization of China causes the increasing emergence of vagrants because of the adjustment of industry structure and the following large-scale unemployment. Vagrant figures in artworks of Chinese context can show the disadvantages brought by the process of modernization instead. In Chen's (2015a) explanation, the modern features of Chinese vagrants are disordered, destructive, flowing, homeless and poor, with a low social status. The same as Xiao Wu, his job does not ensure him a stable income or a decent identity. Following the introduction of character Xiao Wu in the beginning of film, audiences can notice that there is no place for Xiao Wu, as a pickpocket, living in society with dignity, where the Strike Hard Campaign is ongoing. Chinese Strike Hard anti-crime campaign is conducted seriously and broadly in 1980s and 1990s to decrease the crime rate (Trevaskes, 2003a, 2003b), and Xiao Wu is a punishing subject of this political campaign. From national official perspective, Xiao Wu's identity causes chaos in society, because he lives on stealing money from others, so he is not acceptable.

However, camera follows the protagonist Xiao Wu with sensitivity and empathy. The way that the story constructed about Xiao Wu and the character design of him present a nostalgia to the past time and a confusion to the present. The original title of this film is "Jin Xiaoyong's Buddy, Hu Meimei's Sugardaddy, and Liang Changyou's Son: Xiao Wu" (Berry, 2009b), which indicates that the story focuses on the relationships around Xiao Wu. With the development of the film, all these three main relationships of him are destructed because of an addiction to commodity spreading in society, and Xiao Wu is left alone by his old friend, the girl he loves and his family in sequence. Meanwhile, the predicament of Xiao Wu refers to anyone living in society that adapts to the capitalism model, and the reflection to current social circumstance is raised according to the misfortune of Xiao Wu.

The attitude of Xiao Wu to his relationships is sincere and honest. His spirit and morality are presented through the material, but his surrounding relationships are constructed depending on the material as an exchange. To his friend, Xiao Yong, Xiao Wu brings him cash as a gift to celebrate his wedding. To the girl he loves, Meimei, Xiao Wu spends a lot to pay visits to her in a shabby KTV continuously, where Meimei works at. He also shows his classic loyalty to this relationship that he buys a ring for her as a promise to their future. To his family, Xiao Wu gives a gold ring to his mother as a gift, when he returns home. Xiao Wu is sincere to every relationship of him. However, to Xiao Yong, Xiao Wu is a stain on his current successful identity. To Meimei, Xiao Wu is her sugardaddy, who is equal to wealth to secure

her future. Once she meets a richer guy, she leaves Xiao Wu without hesitation. To Xiao Wu's mother, the ring from Xiao Wu is a safeguard for the wedding of Xiao Wu's older brother. All of these indicate that value of reputation and love is calculated by money. Berry (2009b) states that in the environment of economic revolution in China, the social structures and moral standards collapse, and they are replaced by material exchange of capitalism. Xiao Wu is isolated from his surroundings in the transitional stage from traditional socialism to postsocialism, dominated by material and profit exchange.

This social transforming environment is challenging. In the scene that Xiao Wu leaves his home after quarrelling with his family, a loudspeaker in the village, where his family lives in, is broadcasting news about the Hong Kong's return to China. While the official report is paused by a neighbour, and he announces a commercial of pork, saying that if anyone needs pork, "come to my house". The broadcast of the villager implies that this community is formed by acquaintances, and residents can identify whose house they should go to by the voice of the speaker. However, the news of national affair interrupted by a pork message indicates that official announcement is separated from the daily life of ordinary people who used to live in an acquaintance community. The traditional Chinese community is bounded by morality and consanguinity, where the neighbourhood constructed by relatives and acquaintances is intimate, while the modern society is built based on the regulations on official documents and laws to connect strangers and conduct commercial exchange (Fei, 2008a, 2008b). The conflict between the old living habit of traditional community and the rules of modernizing state will continuously exist. With the existing conflict, Xiao Wu needs to fight alone to find out his own survival strategy.

The film ends with a tragedy of Xiao Wu, but it also tries to arouse audiences' active reflection to the current social situation. Xiao Wu is finally noticed and caught by authority while conducting a theft, since when he is stealing, his phone rings, which is bought because of Meimei's willingness. The last scene shows that Xiao Wu is arrested by officer Hao and chained to a telephone pole. At first, the position of viewers is linked with the perspective of the crowd, staring at the embarrassed Xiao Wu. While the camera moves around and changes to Xiao Wu's point-of-view, staring back at the crowd. Jia (2002, as cited in Berry, 2009b) claims that the crowd scene "of people staring at him... could serve as a kind of bridge with the audiences". There are various emotions stimulated from this crowd gazing shot, including rejection, confrontation, panopticon, and violation, and all of which affect the emotions of viewers (Schultz, 2018). With the interaction of the stares, audiences rethink their own position and how the future would be.

Similarly, Lou Ye' also generates discussion space in the film for audiences. Instead of positioning audiences with protagonist, he blurs the reality and fiction inside the story. There are two couples in the film, one couple constructs an original dramatic love story, another couple hears the former lovers'

story and makes comment on the reliability of it by their own perception. Ortells (2010) states that the metafiction feature of *Suzhou River* is that the dichotomy of reality and fiction is out of consideration, but the whole story itself is the depiction of the real social context. Rather than just telling a romance, this film discusses the topic about how young people perceive love in the context of economic-dominated value system. In the first couple's story of Mada and Mudan, the conflict and the drama happening between them is generated from pursuing money. A group of underworlds, including Mada, tries to kidnap Mudan to blackmail her rich father, through which the initial love relationship of Mada and Mudan turns to a deal on money exchange (Chen, 2015c). However, Mada becomes crazy to keep looking for Mudan after her disappearance. Then the following couple, the videographer and Meimei, shows their unbelief to this traditional love story of Mada's unstoppable search. If Meimei is missing one day, the videographer says that he even does not want to bother to find her. They don't need each other, and lover for them is nothing more than a person to fulfil their own emptiness. Chen (2015c) states that the semi-love story of *Suzhou River* indicates the playfulness attitude and doubt towards love of young generation living in modern city.

As mentioned previously, this story is narrated by a videographer from his personal view, while the film camera is not always the same as the narrator's first-person camera. When performing the story that he hears from Meimei, it changes to an omniscient position camera to perform the world of Mada and Mudan (Searls, 2001; Wang, 2014), as director's non-focalized shot (Feng, 2009). Wang (2014) states that there are multiple subjective positions of the camera, including director Lou Ye, videographer (the narrator himself) and camera itself, separating the fiction and non-fiction, fantastic creator and reality recorder, to contribute a multilayered narrative. The recorded reality of the cruel society where main characters struggle to live and the subjective reality of living in that unstable society with an uncertain feeling both exist in the film, which remind viewers to be aware of their own position.

Artistic strategy is used in Lou Ye's film to perform the abstract feeling of living in the developing modernized society. The first-perspective narration not only exhibits what is happening, but also shows what is perceived. The image shown on the screen indicates what is seen and imagined by the videographer, and the voice-over delivers the independent opinion of him, as not just a recorder, but a subjective recorder. Although the film mainly narrates the story about the insistence of Mada, the film starts with the self-introduction of the videographer and ends with the life attitude of him. The videographer shows his perception to the modernized surroundings.

The film deals with the authenticity of the love story between Mada and Mudan from videographer's personal view. The alteration and development of both storylines are guided by the first-perspective voice-over, while its words are full of doubt. Instead of staying at an objective position and sewing up different segments of the story, the narrator participates in the story with an attitude of denying. The

story of Mada and Mudan begins with the statements of the narrator, “Don’t believe me. I’m lying” and “These love stories are everywhere. I can make up one, too”. Mudan only exists in the words of Mada until the end of the film, who appears and confirms their past.

The attempt to confirm the authenticity of the story is not only for the listeners inside the film, the videographer and Meimei, but also for audiences of this film, *Suzhou River*. In the beginning of the film, there is a dialogue between the videographer and Meimei, discussing their relationship with a black screen. Meimei asks the videographer if she goes missing one day, will he keep finding her until he dies. The videographer answers “Yes”, but Meimei insists that he is lying. This is a common debate between lovers about the love performance. However, at the end of the film, this dialogue happens again, and Meimei appears in front of camera, looking at the videographer, also the position of the camera, and asks the same question, “Will you keep finding me till your death?” After knowing the whole story of lie and truth, fiction and reality, the debate extends from the performance of love to the existence of love in modern society. At this moment, Meimei breaks the fourth wall, and viewers are at the same position with videographer being questioned by her. In the previous part of the film, viewers are put in a position of bystander of the story, but here, they are invited to the discussion and become part of the story (Searls, 2001), in terms of the condition whether viewers believe in this story, or only regard this love story as a fiction. It amplifies the suspicious attitude of director regarding the durability of a relationship and the presence of love in the capitalist society.

After Meimei really left the videographer, he confirms to audiences that he will not go to find Meimei, but wait for the next relationship to happen, because in his belief that this relationship would not last forever. Chen (2015c) states that this opinion of videographer is passive, filled with sense of nihilism and the loss of trust among people. While instead of separating the world of Mada and Meimei, Lou Ye lets these two girls appear in the same frame at the end of film, which contradicts the question that the love story told by Mada is made up. Feng (2009) confirms that through literalizing the tale of Mada and Mudan, the film is away from the uncertainty. Director’s last confirmation shows his sympathy for the couple insisting on traditional love value and his lament for the loss of traditional belief in love in the current society to express a nostalgia to it.

From both films, a feeling of cherishing old times is revealed. Jia Zhangke constructs a crime figure, Xiao Wu, whose identity is on the regulation list of the Strike Hard Policy. However, Jia juxtaposes Xiao Wu with other three seemingly decent characters during the whole narration, showing how Xiao Wu is betrayed and injured by them to express a sincere empathy for him. While Lou Ye builds up a character, as a narrator and bystander, of a classic and romantic love story about a man who keeps looking for his missing lover. During the narration of this love story, the perception of it from the listeners is full of doubts and misgivings. Both directors criticize the ruin of classic moral system caused by the new market economy system through their films.

## 5. Conclusion

In this article, two representative films, Jia Zhangke's *Xiao Wu* and Lou Ye's *Suzhou River*, are analysed in detail to explore the common feature shared by the Sixth Generation directors in their films. They use their films to directly deliver their care and perform their reflection to the present, although diverse filming approaches are chosen by them. The setting of their stories is the current society where they live in, so their camera records the reality in that transitional period, exhibiting the vanishing traditional moral value system of the past and highlighting the injustice at present. The straightforward exposure of the societal flaws, the confusing feeling to the future and the sympathy for the marginal group left behind by society in their expression lead their films against social mainstream ideology.

In both fiction films, *Xiao Wu* and *Suzhou River*, the tough and unfair social reality is recorded by camera. The small town in Shanxi is under transformation with the Strike Hard Policy conducted and old buildings demolished, but in the meantime, Xiao Wu's old friend earns a good reputation because of his enormous wealth, although his wealth is illegal. To ensure his current high social status, he tries to avoid meeting Xiao Wu to cover his previous pickpocket history, which is cracked down by social regulation. The line between legal business and crime is blurry, but economic power is dominant. The development of Shanghai is unbalanced and complicated as well. The story happens at Suzhou River, where is backward and chaotic, but in the background of several frames, the Oriental Pearl Tower located at a bustling region represented wealthy and prosperous is in the near distance. The image captured by camera reveals a brutal reality about the severe gap between classes. Characters of lower class in the film struggle to survive, but they maintain being the marginal and outsiders of society.

Meanwhile, both directors show their sympathy for the characters with classic value system. In Jia's film, audiences are kept being together with Xiao Wu to watch the destruction of all his relationships with friend, love and family gradually, because others in the relationship value their connection with Xiao Wu based on material gain rather than emotional bond. In Lou's film, the romantic love story of Mada and Mudan is being judged by the videographer, who narrates the story heard from others, in a subjective version. The traditional love story of searching continuously for a missing lover and the classic vision of love is no longer trustworthy for the new generation. By depicting a sense of uncertainty to the future social condition through characters' experiences, directors foster a communication with audiences and arouse their awareness of the current social circumstance.

## Filmography

Lou, Y. (1998). *Suzhou River* [Film]. Dream Factory.

Jia, Z. (1997). *Xiao Wu* [Film]. Hu Tong Communication.

## References

- Béja, J.-P. (2010). Introduction: 4 June 1989: A watershed in Chinese contemporary history. In J.-P. Béja (Ed.), *The impact of China's 1989 Tiananmen massacre* (pp. 13-24). New York and London: Routledge.
- Berry, M. (2009a). Prelude: Trying to Get Back Home. *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown pleasures: Jia Zhangke's "Hometown trilogy"* (pp. 11-21). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Berry, M. (2009b). Xiao Wu. *Xiao Wu, Platform, Unknown pleasures: Jia Zhangke's "Hometown trilogy"* (pp. 22-49). London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Bo, J. (2018). Dai Jinhua: "The Sixth Generation" is at least correlated with Chinese reality [Dai Jinhua: "Diliudai" Zhishao Haizai Yu Zhongguo Xianshi Fasheng Guanlian]. *Lifeweek*. Retrieved July 18, 2024, from <https://www.lifeweek.com.cn/article/58459>
- Chen, T. (2015a). Vagrant and Its Filmic Representation [Yumin Ji Qi Dianying Zaixian]. *Urban Vagrants in Contemporary Chinese Cinema [Diceng Zaixian: Zhongguo Dangdai Dianying Zhong De Chengshi Yumin]* (pp. 1-36). Beijing: China Theatre Press.
- Chen, T. (2015b). Rock culture and rebellious spirit: Strolling Players in Beijing Basters and Dirt [Yaogun Wenhua Yu Panni Jingshen: Beijing Zazhong He Toufa Luanle Zhong De Liulang Yiren]. *Urban Vagrants in Contemporary Chinese Cinema [Diceng Zaixian: Zhongguo Dangdai Dianying Zhong De Chengshi Yumin]* (pp. 59-86). Beijing: China Theatre Press.
- Chen, T. (2015c). Cruel Stories of Youth: Troubled Teenagers in Beijing Bicycle and Suzhou River [Qingchun Canku Wuyu: Shiqi Sui De Danche He Suzhou He Zhong De Wenti Qingshaonian]. *Urban Vagrants in Contemporary Chinese Cinema [Diceng Zaixian: Zhongguo Dangdai Dianying Zhong De Chengshi Yumin]* (pp. 87-114). Beijing: China Theatre Press.
- Cornelius, S., & Smith, I. H. (2002a). Post-socialist Concerns. *New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations* (pp. 90-105). London: Wallflower.
- Cornelius, S., & Smith, I. H. (2002b). The Sixth Generation. *New Chinese Cinema: Challenging Representations* (pp. 106-117). London: Wallflower.
- Deppman, H. (2021). The Back Shot in Jia Zhangke's *I Wish I Knew*. *Close-ups and long shots in modern Chinese cinemas* (pp. 96-119). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Fei, X. (2018a). A Rule of Ritual [Lizhi Zhixu]. *From the Soil [Xiangtu Zhongguo]* (pp.58-65). Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Fei, X. (2018b). Consanguinity and Regionalism [Xueyuan He Diyuan]. *From the Soil [Xiangtu Zhongguo]* (pp. 86-94). Beijing: People's Publishing House.
- Feng, Y. E. (2009). Revitalizing the Thriller Genre: Lou Ye's Suzhou River and Purple Butterfly. In W. Buckland (Ed.), *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema* (pp. 187-202). Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.

- Gelder, L. V. (1999, April 10). FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW; A Young Man and a Society Without Pity or Remorse. *The New York Times*. Retrieved July 7, 2024, from <https://www.nytimes.com/1999/04/10/movies/film-festival-review-a-young-man-and-a-society-without-pity-or-remorse.html>
- IMDb. (n.d.a). Xiao Wu. *IMDb*. Retrieved July 19, 2024, from [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0144020/awards/?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0144020/awards/?ref_=tt_awd)
- IMDb. (n.d.b). Suzhou River. *IMDb*. Retrieved July 19, 2024, from [https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0234837/awards/?ref\\_=tt\\_awd](https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0234837/awards/?ref_=tt_awd)
- Jenks, C. (1995). Watching your step: The history and practice of the flâneur. In C. Jenks (Ed.), *Visual culture* (pp. 142-160). London and New York: Routledge.
- Kwok, T. (2012). Jia Zhangke's Emotional Questioning of Contemporary China. *Aspect*. Retrieved July 7, 2024, from <https://aspectfilmjournal.web.unc.edu/2021/10/tyler-kwok-jia-zhangkes-emotional-questioning-of-contemporary-china/>
- Lauster, M. (2007). Walter Benjamin's Myth of the "Flâneur". *The Modern Language Review*, 102(1), 139-156.
- Liang, D. (2022, January 26). Xiao Wu: from underground film to restored cinema classic. *EasternKicks*. Retrieved July 7, 2024, from <https://www.easternkicks.com/features/xiao-wu-from-underground-film-to-restored-cinema-classic/>
- Ortells, X. (2010). Symptomatic Metafiction in Lou Ye's Suzhou River. *Asian Cinema*, 21(2), 285-300. [https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.21.2.285\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/ac.21.2.285_1)
- Pickowicz, P. G. (1994). Huang Jinxian and the Notion of Postsocialism. In N. Browne, P. G. Pickowicz, V. Sobchack, & E. Yau (Eds.), *New Chinese Cinemas: Forms, Identities, Politics* (pp. 57-87). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pickowicz, P. G. (2006). Social and Political Dynamics of Underground Filmmaking in China. In P. G. Pickowicz & Y. Zhang (Eds.), *From Underground to Independent: Alternative Film Culture in Contemporary China* (pp. 1-22). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing.
- Rooney, D. (2000, February 16). Suzhou River. *Variety*. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://variety.com/2000/film/reviews/suzhou-river-1117778688/>
- Schultz, C. K. N. (2018). The Peasant and the Mingong: From Empathy to Sympathy to Looking Back. *Moving figures: Class and feeling in the films of Jia Zhangke* (pp. 48-83). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Searls, D. (2001). Suzhou River. *Film Quarterly*, 55(2), 55-60. <https://doi.org/10.1525/fq.2001.55.2.55>

- Silbergeld, J. (2004). Hitchcock with a Chinese Face: Suzhou River. *Hitchcock with a Chinese face: Cinematic doubles, Oedipal triangles, and China's moral voice* (pp. 9-47). Seattle: University of Washington Press.
- Thomson, M. (2000, November 15). Suzhou River (2000). *BBC*. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from [https://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2000/11/15/suzhou\\_river\\_2000\\_review.shtml](https://www.bbc.co.uk/films/2000/11/15/suzhou_river_2000_review.shtml)
- Trevaskes, S. (2003a). Public sentencing rallies in China: The symbolizing of punishment and justice in a socialist state. *Crime, Law and Social Change*, 39, 359-382. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1024085231324>
- Trevaskes, S. (2003b). Yanda 2001: Form and Strategy in a Chinese Anti-crime Campaign. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Criminology*, 36(3), 272-292. <https://doi.org/10.1375/acri.36.3.272>
- Turan, K. (2000, November 10). "Suzhou River" Flows with Cinematic, Hitchcockian Style. *Los Angeles Times*. Retrieved July 8, 2024, from <https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2000-nov-10-ca-49616-story.html>
- Wang, Q. (2014). Surface and Edge: The Cinema of Jia Zhangke and Lou Ye. *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema* (pp. 93-123). Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- White, A. (1999, May 17). Xiao Wu. *Film Threat*. Retrieved July 7, 2024, from <https://filmthreat.com/uncategorized/xiao-wu/>
- Xu, G. G. (2007). "My Camera Doesn't Lie": Cinematic Realism and Chinese Cityscape in Beijing Bicycle and Suzhou River. *Sinascapes: Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (pp. 67-88). Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Xu, J. (2005). Representing Rural Migrants in the City: Experimentalism in Wang Xiaoshuai's So Close to Paradise and Beijing Bicycle. *Screen*, 46(4), 433-449. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/hjh082>
- Zhang, Y. (2010). Space of Production: Postsocialist Filmmaking. *Cinema, Space, and Polylocality in a Globalizing China* (pp. 42-72). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Zhang, Y. (2012). Director, Aesthetics, Genres: Chinese Postsocialist Cinema, 1979-2010. *A companion to Chinese cinema* (pp. 57-74). Malden: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Zhang, Z. (2007). *The urban generation: Chinese cinema and society at the turn of the twenty-first century*. Durham: Duke University Press.