

Mountains May Depart: Socio-historical Changes from a Female Subject Perspective—An Integrated Analysis Based on Feminist Film Theory and Socio-historical Narrative Theory

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Abstract. Drawing on the feminist film theory and socio-historical narrative theories, this paper examines the socio-historical changes from a female subjectivity-based perspective in Zhangke Jia's film *Mountains May Depart*. The paper explores how the female protagonist embodies emotional displacement, identity dissolution, and cultural rupture during the social changes. Combining private emotional experience with structural critique of the society, the film traces the protagonist's evolving subjectivity across the years 1999, 2014, and 2025. With the special camera techniques, temporal dis-junctions, and the nuanced body expressions, the film articulates memory, trauma and loss, not only at the personal level but as reflections of broader social and global changes. Tao Shen emerges as a witness to national and global transformations and a symbolic figure of global marginalization. This study argues that *Mountains May Depart* is a critical site for understanding how female agency, cultural identity, and emotional endurance intertwine within the dynamics of tradition, socio-historical transformations, modernity and globalization.

Keywords: Zhangke Jia, *Mountains May Apart*, feminist film theory, female subjectivity.

1. Introduction

Zhangke Jia's *Mountains May Depart* [1] has become an important cinematic text in the history of 21st-century Chinese cinema. The film meticulously demonstrates the interconnection between individual destiny and reconstruction of socio-cultural structures during periods of social upheavals. Using a three-part narrative spanning the years 1999, 2014, and 2025, the film centers on the life trajectory of the female protagonist Shen Tao, whose emotional choices, familial transitions, and engagement with historical upheavals have become intricate lens reflecting broader social changes. The film presents both the female protagonist's personal emotional narrative and macro-level social and historical changes, presenting the fragmentation of personal experience in the context of China's social and historical transformation.

While traditional theories of historical narrative used to primarily emphasize collective memory and structural transformation [2], feminist film theories critically examine gendered power dynamics [3], female subjectivity, and the politics of vision [4]. This paper combines the two theories and places female subjectivity at the center of analysis. Through the analysis of the protagonist's emotional

experiences, the paper examines how women perceive, record, and react to the social and historical changes in *Mountains May Depart*.

2. The establishment of female subjectivity and the transformation of visual agency

Unlike most traditional cinema in which women are represented primarily as passive objects of male gaze and desire, the establishment of a female subjectivity symbolizes a departure from the passive role of being gazed and desired. The initial step in constructing a perspective based on female subjectivity is to enable women to transcend their objectified status under the gaze of others, establish self-awareness and emotional autonomy, and become active narrative and gaze subjects.

E. Ann Kaplan, in her seminal work *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* [4], proposes strategies for achieving this transformative narrative function, specifically through reconstructing visual agency, which involves the use of cinematic language to underscore women's inner feelings, psychological status, and emotional changes. Bell Hooks further expands this theory in *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators* [5], by introducing a deeper and more nuanced "oppositional gaze," which articulates women's critical consciousness and resistance. Furthermore, in *Gender Trouble* [6] Judith Butler explores the concept of gender itself from a socio-cultural and historical perspective. This provides a deeper cultural and historical foundation for female subjectivity, endowing it with constructive and fluid characteristics. Therefore, the construction of female subjectivity is far from a vague or abstract notion, rather, it is built upon a clear theoretical framework. At the visual level, it represents a shift from being gazed upon to actively gazing upon; at the narrative level, it signifies a transition from passivity to dominance; and at the level of identity, it represents a shift from historical singularity to contemporary multiplicity.

2.1. Construction of Tao Shen's subjectivity-based perspective in emotional narrative

At the beginning of the film, the complex love relationship between Tao Shen, Liang Zi and Jinsheng Zhang is constructed through various lens structures, and Tao Shen's emotional experience in this complex emotional relationship is delicately presented. Tao Shen's emotional choice process between two suitors establishes her female subject status as an emotional actor in the film's narrative. Her cognition of her own emotions and her independent choice of emotions in the complex breaks through the passive image of women as emotional prizes in traditional male-dominated narratives and become a subject with emotional actions.

Tao Shen chose to marry Jinsheng Zhang, who is more representative of the future in the era of social transformation, and gave up Liang Zi, who is emotionally closer but has a lower economic status. This choice is not simply a helpless choice that love and economy cannot be achieved at the same time, but a subjective decision made by Tao Shen after considering various factors such as economic reality and emotional needs in the early stage of social transformation with turbulent changes in urban and rural areas. It is Tao Shen's active choice between capital logic and traditional ethics. The expression of this delicate emotional experience in the film reflects Tao Shen's subjective self-presentation when facing emotional entanglements and love contradictions. This is a manifestation of the construction of a female subjectivity-based perspective.

2.2. The reconfiguration of visual agency in the film

In her seminal essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, Mulvey [3] argues that mainstream Hollywood cinematic narratives are structured through the male gaze, which positions women as passive visual objects—figures to be looked at and desired. *Mountains May Depart* subverts this dominant visual regime. By employing cinematic techniques that challenge the logic of the male gaze, the film grants its female protagonist, Tao Shen, agency over her affective expression and self-

perception, reestablishing her as a subject rather than an object of vision. This shift places the woman's private emotional experience at the center of the narrative, foregrounding a distinctly female subjectivity of vision.

The film uses many long takes and static shots to enhance Tao Shen's introspection and the female gaze. Several extended sequences isolate Tao Shen in solitary moments—such as her solo dance in the snow or her silent gaze in an empty room—where the camera lingers resisting the interruption of any rapid cuts. This technique of prolonging the sense of time (or static and deferred) breaks the fast-paced, consumerist viewing habits of the male gaze, making the viewers immersed in Tao Shen's subjective world, inviting the audience to experience the rhythm of her emotional life and her responses to her lived experience.

At the same time, the film creates an equal and empathetic perspective between the viewer and Tao Shen through the carefully arranged camera angles. The camera often maintains eye level with Tao Shen or slightly downward, forming a viewing posture of empathy, equality, understanding, and respect. Such framing goes against objectification and positions Tao Shen not merely as a protagonist of the narrative but more importantly as a perceptual and emotional subject. Thus the viewer is directed to experience Tao Shen's perception of the passing of time and the affective journeys of her life.

Zhangke Jia is particularly good at using spatial language to convey varied emotional states. In his film, empty, expansive and depopulated environments are often used to externalize inner emotional conditions. Tao Shen is often framed within large, empty spaces—a deserted schoolyard, an abandoned classroom, or a vacant apartment. In these scenes, the camera frequently pulls back, creating a visual effect in which the character appears small against a vast backdrop. This “miniaturization” effect serves a dual function: it conveys Tao Shen's solitude and sense of loss, meanwhile, it emphasizes her vulnerability and resistance against the sweeping forces of social and historical change. In this cinematic context, space has become an externalized image of the female subject's inner experience. Via these subtle visual strategies, Tao Shen emerges not only as a narrative figure but as the emotional core of the film's representational framework. Thus the film effectively deconstructs the logic of the male gaze and establishes a cinematic mechanism for emotional expression and female agency. In doing so, it also makes it possible for the female subject to merge meaningfully with broader historical and social narratives.

3. Social-historical transformation in individual emotional experience

Personal emotional experiences are not isolated events, or totally detached from collective history; more importantly, they are the embodied reflections of gendered structures, social formations, and historical transformations. In *Trauma and Cinema: Cross-Cultural Explorations*, Kaplan [7] articulates this concept by exploring how personal traumatic experiences can be presented in films and how this can become a channel for people to participate in and understand collective historical events.

3.1. The simultaneous fracture of personal emotion and social transformation

The film spans three time periods, covering the entire process of China's transition from the end of its planned economy to the expansion of global capital. Tao Shen's emotional trajectory at each historical juncture mirrors the structural transformations unfolding in Chinese society.

Her romantic choice between Jingsheng Zhang and Liangzi in 1999, though seemingly a matter of personal affection, operates on a deeper level as a cinematic condensation of China's class restructuring and gender reconfiguration in the time of economic transition. In the context of the emerging market economy and the emergence of class differentiation, women's love has to be

involved in economic expectations and social value judgments. Tao Shen's choice of Jingsheng reflects not only a pursuit of financial security and social status but also dramatizes how love, during moments of social upheaval, may capitulate to economic rationality.

Through the long takes and spatial compositions, the film highlights the triangular tension between the main characters and visualizes how individual agency is constrained by social architecture. Tao Shen has become both an agent of personal choice and a subject greatly affected by the historical tensions of her era.

Tao Shen's marital breakdown in 2014 and her estrangement from her son take place in a similarly multilayered manner. On the surface the fracture appears as a personal crisis—the emotional detachment between husband and wife. Actually it also reflects the shifting function of family as a social unit. Tao Shen's worldview is rooted in traditional emotional ethics. She finds herself growing increasingly distant from her husband, a man who has achieved transnational mobility and financial success in the era of global capitalism. Their separation is not simply the end of a romantic relationship, but the disintegration of family identity, mother-child connection, and economic function. Tao Shen loses not only love and motherhood in the traditional sense, but also her place within the economic logic of the family structure, experiencing what can be called a social and emotional exile. The film intensifies this emotional dislocation through extended takes, empty frames, and ambient silence, showcasing the dilemma of contemporary women in the process of family disintegration and identity dissolution. In this sense, Tao Shen symbolizes the silent trauma suffered by female subjects during periods of profound social change.

By 2025, Tao Shen is left without kin or family. Her roles as wife and mother have become fully defunct; she has become a silent signifier, one no longer able to articulate or share emotion within the social sphere. Her visually quiet acts—making dumplings and dancing alone—embody a powerful tension of emotional rupture. The act of making dumplings, once imbued with the cultural connotations of celebration and reunion, is now hollowed out. Stripped of its symbolic resonance due to the severing of cultural memory and emotional connection, the dumpling-making becomes a ritual emptied of content.

Unlike the gradually unfolding narrative structure at the beginning, Tao Shen's solitary dance has no audience or social reference. It becomes a private dialogue between herself and her memory, unfolding in an atmosphere of solitude. These repeated gestures are not merely physical habits left behind by cultural remnants, but also a form of mourning for lost identity. At this stage, Tao Shen carries the multilayered burden of cultural dislocation, a broken mother-son relationship and existential uncertainty—all deeply rooted in the context of globalization. Her emotional experience cannot be confined to the realm of individual feelings alone. It is a manifestation of the intrusion of historical and social mechanisms into the private sphere. Tao Shen's loneliness is not purely personal, but an emotional emptiness, a trace left by a rapidly transforming era.

3.2. Cinematic language as an expression of female historical consciousness

Mountains May Depart employs a nonlinear, tripartite narrative structure (1999 → 2014 → 2025) that uses temporal discontinuity to visualize Tao Shen's evolving states of being—youthful vitality, maternal engagement, and elderly solitude. Through these temporal leaps, the film conveys a fractured sense of memory and a gradual erosion of identity. This disjunctive temporality aligns Tao Shen's private life trajectory with a broader historical rupture, merging individual experience with collective dislocation.

The film also externalizes this fusion of private emotion and historical perception through its nuanced use of music—both synchronous and dissonant in relation to image. In 1999, the upbeat and triumphant pop anthem *Go West* plays as a background track, symbolizing the optimism and aspirations of a younger generation facing a new economic era. However, in 2025, the same melody

returns in a starkly different register—fragmented, melancholic, and embedded within a muted visual landscape of falling snow and desaturated colors. This emotional inversion of the musical motif traces the arc of Tao Shen's journey from youthful hope to existential disillusionment. In the latter half of the film, it increasingly withdraws its musical score, opting instead for ambient sound—wind, hollow footsteps, and environmental stillness. This reverse strategy of “demusicalization” heightens the affective tension of the film's latter half. By stripping away musical cues, the film intensifies the oppressive atmosphere surrounding Tao Shen, reinforcing her emotional alienation, social voicelessness, and the rupture of historical memory.

In the film, Zhangke Jia carefully orchestrates spatial framing, temporal structure, and musical modulation not merely to narrate Tao Shen's emotional journey of solitude and displacement, but also to sensitively reflect the cultural ruptures that underlie such affective transformations in the context of China's modernization and globalization. As the Chinese national economy extends deeper into the structures of global capital, the emotional traumas inscribed upon the female body likewise begin to take on cross-cultural and transnational dimensions. This cinematic articulation lays the groundwork for understanding the emotional dislocation and identity fragmentation experienced by women within the globalizing world.

4. The cinematic expression of memory, body, and historical trauma

According to Cathy Caruth [8], traumatic events are often not fully understood when they occur; instead, they enter the unconscious world, still unresolved and therefore difficult to express through linear or coherent language. With the use of the non-linear, temporal leaps, *Mountains May Depart* employs a fragmented narrative that breaks away from the logic of chronological storytelling. This fragmentation reflects not only the spiritual disorientation brought about by socio-historical fracture but also the non-linear, disconnected nature of traumatic memory. One of the most emotionally influential and symbolic scenes in the film occurs in 2025, when Tao Shen quietly makes dumplings. On the surface, it appears to be a traditional domestic scene, yet at a deeper level, it symbolizes the intersection of rupture in cultural memory, the loss of maternal identity, and a recurrence of emotional trauma. As Maurice Halbwachs points out in *On Collective Memory* [9], when collective memory collapses, the individual may still enact remnant rituals to maintain fragments of cultural imagery. Accompanied by a hallucinated voice of her son calling out to her, Tao Shen's movements in the dumpling-making are mechanical and hollow. Making dumplings becomes a remnant ritual lacking collective significance, sustained only by body memory. In this sense, the cooking act is no longer functional; it becomes a lingering ritual and a bodily inscription of loss. Therefore, Tao Shen is not feeding others, but rather, through bodily repetition, preserving the trauma resulting from the identity dissolution and the breakdown of emotions.

Tao Shen's solitary dance in 2025 is not merely a flashback to her youthful memories of 1999, but an echo of physical trauma shaped by her lived experience. Her movements in the snow are slow and stiff, her clothes clashing with the pale winter landscape. While in the distance, the never changing Wenfeng Pagoda stands tall. It silently witnesses the passage of time, and highlights her physical aging and emotional loneliness. All together these visual elements form a vivid representation of traumatic memory. In women's trauma narratives, the body often becomes the site where repressed emotions are expressed. In this film, Tao Shen's dance has become a form of embodied response to a broken identity, family dissolution, and cultural displacement. From this perspective, she is less dancing than remembering, resisting the deletion of the history through embodied memory. In this sense, corporeal memory functions as a crucial medium connecting personal emotions and collective history. Through bodily repetition and nostalgic gestures, Tao Shen not only recalls but also witnesses the disruption of family, society, and cultural continuity. Her body becomes a living archive, and

dancing becomes a form of emotional history—a memory act that transforms personal experience into historical testimony.

E. Ann Kaplan [7] emphasizes that the female body can function as a site of historical trauma. In the film, the body is granted with such a function. Tao Shen's bodily transformation—from youth to old age—becomes a physical record of socio-historical change. Her solitude, silence, and physical aging reflect the disintegration of the social structure. From this perspective, the body is no longer merely a medium for individual experience; it becomes a sensor and expressive tool for recording historical disconnection, which redefines the role of bodily presence in the deep intertwining of personal emotions and collective memory. In line with trauma narrative theory, the body is not a neutral or natural object, but a site shaped by social structures and gendered discourses. When language and interpersonal systems fail, the body plays the role of bearing and expressing trauma and memory. Tao Shen's dumpling-making and solitary dance in 2025 exemplify this form of "somatic resonance." Through silent, repetitive gestures, she responds to the identities and intimate bonds that have been stripped away. These seemingly minor body gestures constitute a profound mode of embodied expression of the the invasive forces of social history. The body not only perceives the present, but echoes the past and anticipates the future—becoming a living archive of displacement, endurance, and resistance.

5. Conclusion

By integrating feminist theory with socio-historical narrative analysis, this paper has explored how *Mountains May Depart* articulates the emotional displacement and identity dissolution experienced by the female subject amid structural ruptures and cultural flows. Feminist theory allows for a nuanced examination of private affective experience and the female subjectivity in visual agency, while a historical narrative framework situates the individual's fate within broader cultural and political transformations. Through the depiction of Tao Shen's personal trajectory across distinct temporal moments, the film vividly illustrates the psychic toll that China's socio-historical transformations exert on the individual.

Tao Shen's life story is not merely a narrative of private emotional evolution; it also serves as an affective chronicle of historical rupture and collective trauma. Her bodily and emotional responses mark her as both a witness to, and a casualty of, China's entry into global modernity. The film thereby reveals the crises of affect and cultural identity that characterize the global era, while also foregrounding the vital role of women as bearers of memory and witnesses to historical change.

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