

The Reintegration of the Past as Self-Realisation: Zhao Tao in Jia Zhangke's Films

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Abstract—This article examines the figure Zhao Tao in Jia Zhangke's films in light of Carl Jung's psychoanalytical theory. Zhao is a recurring aesthetic trope in Jia's films, and the characters she plays often have an intimate relationship with the past. Nevertheless, this relationship has not been systematically investigated, especially its symbolism of the typical relationship between the past and the self in post-social China. To fill this research gap, the article will explore how Zhao's characters discover, preserve, and adapt the past in *I Wish I Knew* (2010), *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018). Through a Jungian lens, these three levels of engagement with the past will be demonstrated as corresponding with Jung's psychoanalytical theory of self-realisation, which entails the confrontation with the shadow, the embodiment of the archetype, and individuation. Thus, by articulating a film-philosophy dialogue between Jia and Jung, this article will develop a philosophy of self-realisation based on the symbolism of Zhao. Through the reintegration of the past, the individuals can overcome the fragmentation of temporality and selfhood in the postmodern world and achieve self-realisation.

Keywords—Jia Zhangke, Jung, psychoanalysis, self-realisation.

I. INTRODUCTION

ZHAO Tao as the lead actress is a recurring aesthetic trope in Jia Zhangke's films. Despite the variety of the characters she plays, these characters often have an intimate relationship with the past. For instance, Ping Zhu demonstrates that Zhao's character in *Still Life* (2006), Sheng Hong, represents the 'good people', 'those who value and take responsibility for their past [24].' Similarly, Schultz argues that the role of Zhao in *24 City* (2008) contributes to the emotional commemoration of the past [19]. However, this relation between Zhao's characters and the past lacks systematic exploration, particularly, how this relation can be read allegorically as the general relation between the individual and the past in the postsocial China. In this direction, this article will unpack the symbolism of Zhao's characters in *I Wish I Knew* (2010), *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018). These films are chosen because they represent three levels of engagement with the past, that is, the discovery, the preservation, and the adaptation of the past. In essence, this article will argue that Zhao, as a recurring aesthetic trope in Jia's films, accumulatively develops a philosophy of self-realisation in the postmodern era when time and individuals are fragmented: The reintegration of the past into the present is a way to the individual's self-realisation. To substantiate this argument, firstly, this article will connect

Chinese postsocialism to the larger picture of postmodernism, which fragments both time and individuals. Secondly, in light of Carl Jung's theory of self [14], this article will demonstrate how Zhao's characters' discovery, preservation, and adaptation of the past in the three films successively correspond with the three stages of self-realisation conceptualised by Jung, namely, confronting the shadow, embodying the archetype, and individuation. This article chooses Jung's theory because it is new to the study of Jia's films. By demonstrating its effectivity in illuminating Zhao's symbolism, this article aims to introduce it as an applicable and productive theoretical perspective to the field.

II. FRAGMENTED TEMPORALITIES AND INDIVIDUALS

Jia Zhangke is the leading figure of Chinese six-generation filmmakers who work in the context of what Chris Berry calls 'Chinese postsocialism' [4]. As Berry explains, the term 'postsocialism' does not mean socialism has ended in China, but 'the forms and structures of the modern (in this case socialism) persist long after faith in the grand narrative that authorizes it has been lost' [4]. Namely, people no longer believe in the constant progression of history, as the socialist narrative advocates. What underlines this loss of faith is the failure of articulating the present and the past with a coherent and meaningful logic. In this sense, postsocialism is a crisis of temporality.

As a crisis of temporality, postsocialism is part of the general temporal crisis of postmodernism, as Berry says Chinese 'postsocialism has more parallels with Lyotard's postmodernism' [4]. 'Postmodernism' is a critical term used by various scholars like Charles Jencks, Jean-François Lyotard, and Fredric Jameson to designate a historical, aesthetic, and epistemological shift from modernism since the mid-1970s [6]. Fundamental to postmodernism, as Fredric Jameson says, is that time conceptualised by Bergson as duration is shattered into fragments [13]. Bergson regards time as duration, 'the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances' [3]. However, Jameson argues that this concept of time as duration, this 'great high modernist thematics of time and temporality', is shattered by the postmodern culture which thrives on fragmenting and recycling the fragments of past styles [13]. Therefore, in the postmodern era, time is fragmented. Furthermore, this fragmentation of time leads to the fragmentation of individuals. As Jameson puts it, lacking the 'experience of temporal continuity', the individual

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'is condemned to live a perpetual present with which the various moments of his or her past have little connection and for which there is no conceivable future on the horizon' [12]. In other words, the fragmented temporalities of the postmodern world disable the individual to experience the persistence of self over time, which results in the fragmentation of the individual.

Against this background of fragmented temporalities and individuals, this article will examine how the individuals played by Zhao relate to the past in *I Wish I Knew* (2010), *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018). Apart from these films, Zhao has performed in most of Jia's other films, including *Platform* (2000), *Unknown Pleasures* (2002), *The World* (2004), *Still Life* (2006), *24 City* (2008), and *A Touch of Sin* (2013). Given her prominent position in Jia's films (and her status as Jia's wife), Godfrey Cheshire is justified to call her Jia's 'muse' [7], the ancient Greek sister-goddesses who inspire artists and poets. As Jia's muse, Zhao is loaded with symbolisms worthy of appreciation. However, this muse status can also be problematic. For instance, Anne Billson sees a muse as 'the female model or lust object of a male artist' [5]. The reason is that 'the relationship between muse and film-maker has traditionally been regarded as that of a male auteur and his female *acteur fétiche*, often an offscreen lover' [5], which is exactly the case between Jia and Zhao. This article will reflect more on this feminist critique of the muse when dealing with *Mountains May Depart* (2015).

Apart from elucidating Zhao's symbolism, this article will also introduce a theoretical perspective to the study of Jia's films. Jia's films have been approached from various theoretical perspectives, such as Agamben's theory of *dispositif* and profanation [17], Brecht's theory of alienation effect [24], Bergson's theory of duration [8], Benjamin's theory of *flâneur* [23], Deleuze's theory of hodological space [10], Žižek's theory of objective violence [22], and the affect theory [19]. Despite this theoretical vibrancy, few studies can be found that employ Jung's theory to illumine Jia's films. Since Jungian approach to film studies is a fast-growing field [9], this article seeks to introduce Jung's theory of self into the study of Jia's films. In light of Jung's theory, this article will demonstrate how Zhao's characters' discovery, preservation, and adaptation of the past in the following three films successively correspond with the three stages of self-realisation envisioned by Jung, namely, confronting the shadow, embodying the archetype, and individuation.

III. *I WISH I KNEW* (2010): DISCOVERING THE PAST AS CONFRONTING THE SHADOW

I Wish I Knew (2010) is a documentary about Shanghai from multiple perspectives. The film features various people from different backgrounds but all related to the metropolis. It tells their stories through interviews, archival photos, intertitles, location sequences, re-enactments, and filmic intertexts. As the film title, 'I wish I knew', clearly indicates, the theme of the film is to discover and retrieve the past of Shanghai, which is in oblivion and being obliterated [11].

In this filmic discovery and retrieval of the past, Zhao plays a unique role. She wanders through the urban fabrics of

Shanghai, and her wandering punctuates the film's storytelling. For instance, before the first interviewee, Cheng Danqing, tells his story, a preceding sequence introduces Zhao into the film and the city of Shanghai. The ship looming in the misty background and her bewildering demeanour imply that she is a newcomer and stranger to the city. Then, in an extreme long shot, she walks on the debris of the wharf and towards the city emerging from the misty depth of the screen. This shot is full of symbolism. The debris symbolises the past of Shanghai which is fragmented and eroded by the stream of time, here embodied by the sea. Walking on the debris, Zhao walks into the fragmented past and towards the overall story it tells, the city which is emerging from the mist. After this shot, Danqing, the first interviewee, starts to tell his story. Thus, the narrative pattern of the film is set up at the beginning. As the film crosscuts between the telling of stories and Zhao's wandering, she becomes the counterpart of the filmmaker on screen, who discovers and retrieves the fragmented and eroded past. Moreover, through the wandering, she becomes the thread, the underlying logic that binds the fragmented past into a coherent narrative. In short, she is the 'I' who wishes to know. However, despite Zhao's wish to know, Aili Zheng argues that she is only a detached onlooker, a 'flânerie' of Shanghai [23]. A 'flâneur', as characterised by Charles Baudelaire, is 'a man of leisure who with a detached gaze takes in the exciting street life of the modernising Paris' [23]. Although Zheng has updated the gender and the location of the flâneur, from the masculine to the feminine and from Paris to Shanghai, she argues that Zhao maintains the detached and alienated status of the flâneur. 'Her inquisitive expression reveals a sense of unfamiliarity with what she comes to see' and she is mostly shown 'as the solitary figure, diminutive in long shot' [23]. In essence, through the lens of flânerie, Zheng demonstrates that Zhao is alienated from the past of Shanghai. This alienation, interpreted from a Jungian perspective, implies that Zhao discovers the past of Shanghai as confronting her shadow. Jung uses the metaphor 'shadow' to indicate the dark side of the individual, the repressed content of the psyche, the unconscious. To realise oneself, the individual must confront and integrate the shadow as part of oneself, namely, to be conscious of the unconscious [14]. Moreover, Jung underlines the interpersonal dimension of the unconscious [14]. He argues that deeper than the personal unconscious, there exists a layer of the collective unconscious, which is also constitutive of the individual psyche and common to all humankind [14]. Therefore, other people's past, as the collective unconscious, can also be one's shadow, which is exactly the situation of Zhao in *I Wish I Knew* (2010).

Although Zheng regards Zhao as a detached flâneur, alienated from what she discovers, she does confront and integrate the past of Shanghai as her shadow. In a film-within-film scene, the camera sees Zhao watch a film in an empty cinema. Her upright posture and attentive eyes show that she is not a detached flâneur but an engaging and engrossed audience. The lead actress of this film-within-film is Shangguan Yunzhu whose story is told by her son immediately after this film-within-film scene. Zhao is so moved by the film of Shangguan that she even intertwines with her destiny. When the son starts

to tell the tragic death of Shangguan, the film, instead of cutting directly to the interview scene of the son, still keeps the image of Zhao on screen. The result is one of the most moving sequences of the film. In slow motion, Zhao walks in a deluge of rain, drenched and dejected, against a soundscape that blends the terrifying thunder, the mournful background music, and the son telling how his sister reveals to him their mother's death and breaks down. This synchronisation of Zhao's miserable image and the sound telling and symbolic of Shangguan's tragedy enables Zhao momentarily to become Shangguan and embody her tragic destiny. Therefore, far from being a detached flânerie, as Zheng claims, Zhao engagingly discovers and integrates the fragments of the past, as her shadow, into herself.

IV. *MOUNTAINS MAY DEPART* (2015): PRESERVING THE PAST AS EMBODYING THE ARCHETYPE

After discovering the past in *I Wish I Knew* (2010), Zhao, as the character Sheng Tao, preserves the past in *Mountains May Depart* (2015). This film comprises three stories of the same group of people taking place respectively in 1999, 2014, and 2025. This narrative structure accentuates the departure of and estrangement between these people due to the elapsing of time. In this grand departure, which, as the film title suggests, even moves the mountains, Zhao plays the character Sheng who resists the departure and preserves the past. While everyone else gradually leaves their hometown, Fen Yang, Sheng (Zhao) stays there till the end of the film [18]. Moreover, when Liang Zi and Dollar come back to Fen Yang in 2014, Sheng (Zhao) is the person who furnishes them with the keys to their home and past. In 1999 when Liang decides to leave Fen Yang and swears 'never to return', he throws his key away. Then, it appears that Sheng (Zhao) has retrieved and preserved the key and returns it to Liang in 2014. In close-up, the film highlights that the key is the same as it was 15 years ago, which transforms the key into a symbol of the past, a key endowed with the spiritual ability to unlock the past. Likewise, when Dollar, Sheng's son, come back in 2014 for his grandfather's funeral, Sheng (Zhao) gives him a set of keys to their home, saying 'you will always be welcome there'. In both cases, the home, as the place of origin, symbolises the past, and Sheng (Zhao), who offers the key to the past. Thus, Sheng (Zhao) embodies what Jung calls 'the mother archetype' [15]. Archetypes are primordial and universal images that constitute the foundation of the collective unconscious. As such, they are the deepest and darkest shadows that an individual needs to integrate to realise oneself. The mother archetype is a case in point. This archetype refers to the mythological mother goddess, such as 'the Mother of God, the Virgin, and Sophia' [15].

The qualities associated with it are maternal solicitude and sympathy; the magic authority of the female; the wisdom and spiritual exaltation that transcend reason; any helpful instinct or impulse; all that is benign, all that cherishes and sustains, that fosters growth and fertility [15].

It is this archetypal mother figure which Sheng (Zhao) embodies in *Mountains May Depart* (2015). Endowed with the

spiritual wisdom to value the past, the maternal sympathy to preserve the past, and the magic keys to unlock the past, Sheng (Zhao) is the resourceful and transcendental mother goddess.

This symbolism of the mother archetype culminates at the end of the film. The final sequence is preceded by Dollar standing at a seashore, against the image and sound of the sea, pensively calling the name of Sheng Tao (Zhao Tao), his mother, 'Tao', meaning 'wave'. This combination of the mother, the sea and Sheng's (Zhao's) namesake unmistakably invokes the symbolism of the mother archetype because the sea, as the origin of life, is one of the primordial mother-symbols [15]. Thus, this scene initiates Sheng's (Zhao's) apotheosis as the archetypal mother goddess. The film, then, cuts to Sheng (Zhao) cooking in the kitchen, activity and environment deeply connected to the mother. A few seconds later, Dollar's calling transmigrates into the scene and Sheng (Zhao) seems to hear it, a magic moment which hints at her supernatural status. The magic continues. Despite the season being winter, as the camera tracks her going to the drawing-room, the room is shown filled with flourishing spring flowers like tulips and lilies. Thus, the blossoming mise-en-scène confirms again that Sheng (Zhao) is the archetypal mother goddess 'standing for fertility and fruitfulness' [15].

The final scene shows how she conducts the fertility ritual to fructify the earth. In a long take, the camera tracks her walking to an open field and starting to dance upon the frozen earth, against heavy snowfall.

By dancing, she seems to combat against the snow, the cold logic of time that ruthlessly departs, and bless the earth, the source of life. At the same time, 'Go West', the same background music which appears at the start of the film, bursts into the scene with the full energy of the past, as if bursting out of Sheng (Zhao), who preserves the past. Therefore, while in *I Wish I Knew* (2010), Zhao represents the spirit of the film title and discovers the past, in *Mountains May Depart* (2015), as Sheng who preserves the past, she resists the title. Although mountains may depart, she, as the eternal archetypal mother goddess, will stay forever. Nevertheless, this embodiment of the mother archetype is subject to feminist critique. Like her status as Jia's muse, Zhao's embodiment of the mother archetype risks the essentialisation of the female. Loaded with symbolisms like home, origin, motherhood, and fertility, Sheng (Zhao) seems to reinforce the stereotype of women as the eternal housewife. As Simone de Beauvoir argues, this stereotype significantly limits the agency and potentiality of women because it confines women to the domestic space [2]. Furthermore, this essentialisation of women as the archetypal mother also runs against Jung's theory of self-realisation. Jung argues, to realise oneself, the individual, after embodying the archetype, also needs to differentiate oneself from the archetype [15]. Namely, one needs to adapt the archaic archetype to the present state, a process Jung calls 'individuation' [15] and the theme of Jia's latest feature film, *Ash Is Purest White* (2018).

V. *ASH IS PUREST WHITE* (2018): ADAPTING THE PAST TO THE PRESENT AS INDIVIDUATION

Discovering and preserving the past in *I Wish I Knew* (2010)

and *Mountains May Depart* (2015), Zhao, as the character Zhao Qiaoqiao, adapts the past to the present in *Ash Is Purest White* (2018). The film, whose Chinese name is 'Jianghu's children', centres on a traditional and untranslatable Chinese idea 'Jianghu' (river and lake), which connotes geographical and social margins and the society formed by the marginalised people. Moreover, Jianghu also refers to a particular tradition, which ambivalently includes dog-eat-dog logic and righteousness. It is this tradition of Jianghu that Zhao adapts to the present in *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), and by this adaptation, individuates herself.

According to Jung, individuation 'is a process of differentiation, having for its goal the development of the individual personality [16].' It is to become 'a differentiated being from the general, collective psychology [16].' Hence, unlike *Mountains May Depart* (2015) in which Zhao embodies the collective mother archetype, *Ash Is Purest White* (2018) shows how Zhao adapts the Jianghu tradition to the present needs, whereby she fulfils her psychological development.

At first, Zhao is but a naive young woman. She falls in love with a gang leader, Bin, who is the representative of Jianghu at this stage. Though connecting with Jianghu through love, she remains a traditional 'decent' woman who wishes to 'run a business' and 'live a normal and happy life' with Bin [1]. However, she is forced into Jianghu when Bin is under attack. To intimidate the attackers, Zhao fires Bin's gun. After showing her firing, the camera stylistically holds her still, in the foreground of and occupying half of the screen, with a courageous and serene aura and a hand pointing the gun skywards. Thus, the cinematography puts Zhao in a majestic position and portrays her as the embodiment of Jianghu's dog-eat-dog logic par excellence. However, this archetypal style of Jianghu is incompatible with the status quo and Zhao is consequently criminalised and imprisoned.

As the film develops, Zhao also develops a more sophisticated personality and becomes more capable of adapting the past tradition of Jianghu to the present. Tellingly, the second part of the film itself is an adaptation of an old film of Jia, *Still Life* (2006). Both stories take place in the same place, Fengjie, where, Zhao wears the same costume with the same bottle of water and seeks a long-missed lover called Bin [21]. This striking formal similarity suggests that *Ash Is Purest White* (2018) is thematically an adaptation of the past to the present. After her release, Zhao goes to seek Bin. Barren with money, she cheats to eat at banquets and blackmails well-to-do males for substantial amounts of cash. Harassed by a motor driver, she improvises a seductive trick to steal his motorcycle. Avoided by Bin, she fakes a rape report to force police to call him. In short, she adapts the traditional dog-eat-dog logic of Jianghu to meet her present needs, thereby developing a more independent and worldly-wise personality different from her past dependency and naivety.

With such sophistication, she becomes the leader of Bin's gang and accommodates Bin when he suffers from a stroke. The following dialogue ensues when Zhao walks Bin in a wheelchair outside:

Bin: Do you hate me?

Zhao: I don't hate you because I don't love you anymore.

Bin: No love? Why do you accommodate me, then?

Zhao: Righteousness is the principle of Jianghu. Being no longer a man of Jianghu, you cannot understand.

Replacing Bin as the representative of Jianghu, Zhao swaps her gender role with his. Namely, she acquires conventional masculine traits such as independence, leadership, and assertiveness, which differentiates her from the traditional feminine psychology she used to represent. Accommodating Bin, she adapts Jianghu's traditional principle of righteousness, connotating mutual care between fellows, to care for Bin's illness, thereby manifesting a magnanimous personality. In essence, she embodies the spirit of the film title: 'after high-temperature combustion, ash is purest white' [1]. Zhao, via adapting the past tradition of Jianghu to meet vicissitudes of life, individuates herself into an independent, sophisticated, and magnanimous person.

VI. CONCLUSION

Zhao Tao, as a recurring aesthetic trope in Jia's films, accumulatively develops a philosophy of self-realisation in the postmodern era when time and individuals are fragmented: the reintegration of the past into the present is a way to the individual's self-realisation. Firstly, this article has demonstrated that Chinese postsocialism is a temporal crisis and connected it to postmodernism which engenders fragmented temporalities and individuals. Then, this article has successively discussed and demonstrated how Zhao's characters discover, preserve, and adapt the past in *I Wish I Knew* (2010), *Mountains May Depart* (2015), and *Ash Is Purest White* (2018), thereby reintegrating the past into the present. This article has also shown how this reintegration of the past corresponds to the three stages of self-realisation envisioned by Jung, namely, confronting the shadow, embodying the archetype, and individuation. By establishing such a correspondence between the reintegration of the past and self-realisation, this article has interpreted Zhao in Jia's films as Shakespeare's Hamlet who famously says, 'the time is out of joint. O cursed spite, that ever I was born to set it right!' [20].

In essence, this essay has contributed to knowledge in three ways. Firstly, combining Zhao's symbolisms and Jung's theory of self, it produced a philosophy of self-realisation for individuals in the postmodern world: self-realisation via reintegrating the past into the present. Secondly, it introduced Jungian psychoanalysis as a potential and productive theoretical perspective to the study of Jia's films, thereby extending the field of Jungian film studies. Finally, it illuminated the figure of Zhao Tao, a recurring aesthetic trope in Jia's films, as a Hamletian character who is born to realise herself by, to paraphrase Shakespeare, setting the disjointed time right.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

For the achievement and publication of this paper, the author thanks Dr. Corey Schultz at the University of Nottingham Ningbo China, who supervised the writing of this paper.

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