

# Nostalgia in Urban Cinema: A Comparative Analysis of Zhang Yang's *Shower* (1999) and Jia Zhangke's *24 City* (2008)

Zhun Gu

University of Nottingham

Since the late 1990s, the acceleration of modernization in many cities in China has resulted in the demolition (*chaiqian*) of old buildings. In this context, many cinematic works produced by China's urban filmmakers have reflected this social transformation. Such works not only show a desire to focus on the grand tides of the transformation of post-socialist China, but more importantly, also shed light on the marginalised subcultures and self-marginalizing countercultures that are frequently overlooked by society. Drawing on interdisciplinary studies in film studies and urban culture, I situate "urban cinema" within a nexus of local and global economic, historical, and ideological contexts. Analysing two films from the aspects of the trope of demolition which happened in Beijing and Chengdu, documentary aesthetics, and restorative/reflective nostalgia for the socialist lifestyle, this article argues that the two filmmakers adopt the theme of nostalgia in urban films to represent city

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images and reconstruct their identities. It is found that nostalgia is not only represented as the basis of filmmaking in their works; it also constructs the film language and identity of the urban filmmakers.

### **Historical Background and Urban Cinema**

Seen as a result of post-Mao reform programs since the 1980s, urban demolition has brought about a visible impact on urban development. The changes can be identified from four aspects: first, many Chinese cities, both large and small, have undergone an intense process of changing in infrastructural and social dimensions. Many traditional buildings and communities, such as *hutong* in Beijing and *longtang* in Shanghai, have been torn down to make room for modern skyscrapers. This type of demolition which happens in Beijing and Chengdu are reflected in both films this article focuses on. Second, some coastal cities, such as Shenzhen and Shanghai, are made Special Economic Zones in the early 1990s, and shoulder the mission to lead the economic reform programs. The political slogan underlying these reforms is “socialism can also practise market economy”, and these Special Economic Zones attract many people to look for their capital dreams (Goodman 41). Third, the reform of large-scale state-owned companies further promotes urban demolition. Many companies, such as 420 factory in film *24 City*, move to new places, and the old workshop buildings are demolished. Fourth, two events – China joining the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 and hosting the Beijing 2008 Olympics – have also stimulated China’s urban development. Overall, tremendous capital investment has boosted the development of Chinese real estate and urban transformation.

These social phenomena have attracted the attention of many filmmakers, especially the so-called Sixth Generation urban filmmakers. Urban cinema, as the name indicates, is the kind of film that pays more attention to urban developments in China. Most of the Sixth Generation directors are the 70s generation who grew up in the cities and studied in the elite departments of directing or cinematography such as Beijing Film Academy (Zhang 16). For example, Jia Zhangke has the experience of living in a small city in Shanxi province and studying at Beijing Film Academy. Compared to the Fifth Generation filmmakers, who have predominantly rural aesthetics of searching rural values and national

allegories, urban generations make the city a subject in their works. As Yomi Braester argues, “Many works address mostly young people’s sense of alienation from the material conditions in the quickly developing metropolises to present the city as the battle-ground between an oppressive collectivity and rebellious individuals. These films often focus on marginalised subcultures and self-marginalizing countercultures” (242). Such works explore the tides of urban circumstance and their effects on the lives of individual people, often those excluded from the mainstream of society, such as the physically disabled or mentally disturbed, or artistic communities. Ning Ying, one of the Sixth Generation filmmakers, also says, “We need to return to our roots” (Qiu 250).<sup>1</sup> Root-seeking is the main theme in the works of writers and artists in the 1980s and the representation of the imagined countryside is a central narrative; rather, this new transformation to the consumer culture relocates Ning Ying’s root in Beijing and some other big cities of China. Yomi Braester and Ning Ying’s descriptions suggest that urban cinema focuses on particular changes that have affected urban residents, seeking to capture the life of ordinary people, and paying more attention to the impact of post-socialist modernity. At the same time, compared to some commercial films, the urban filmmakers stay away from state-sponsored “leitmotif” (*zhuxuanlü*) films of socialist ideals and nationalism. Urban films signal their positions as a minority, but also keep communication with the mainstream. Thus, to some extent, urban films are deployed as tools for social reflection and critique, and negotiate with reality to construct a form of the image of the city.

A long list of films that urban generation filmmakers shoot focus on the social changes and urban circumstance in the process of urban transformation, including Zhang Nuanxin’s *Morning, Beijing* (1990), Zhou Xiaowen’s *No Regrets about Youth* (1991), Wang Xiaoshuai’s *Winter Days Beijing Bicycle* (2001), Shi Runjiu’s *Beautiful New World* (1998), Lou Ye’s *Suzhou River* (2000), Jia Zhangke’s *24 City* (2008), and Zhang Yang’s *Shower* (1998), *Quitting* (2001), and *Sunflower* (2005). In this

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<sup>1</sup> Translated from Chinese-language source by the article author.

article, I explore the motif of nostalgia by probing into two films: *Shower* and *24 City*. Fred Davis characterizes nostalgia as a discontinuity between past and present. It is often less about the past than it is about the present, and about potential discontinuities feeling between present and past (Davis 50). Davis's discussion of the relationship between past, present and future in nostalgia provides a reflective tool for an assessment about the past and present. It becomes an emotional longing for lost moments, which is triggered by the situation of present and becomes a critical reflection of historical periods. Nostalgia has been investigated by many other scholars. In this article, I will apply Svetlana Boym's concepts of "reflective nostalgia" and "restorative nostalgia" (45). Boym's definition of nostalgia combines personal and historical memories to explore the spaces of collective nostalgia. She investigates the ruins and construction sites of post-communist cities in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Berlin, and Prague. Boym unravels the threads of the global epidemic of longing and its antidotes. This cycle of demolition and reconstruction is mirrored in the cities of post-socialist China, such as Beijing and Chengdu. Two kinds of nostalgia will be adopted in the third part of this article to depict a comprehensive structure about the missing of the past and yearning for the future: urban generation filmmakers' memories about past socialist community life and their dilemma between the loss of old lifestyle and post-socialism modernity in the historical context of the social transformation since the 1990s.

Three reasons underpin the choice of films for analysis: first, both films sketch the contours of Chinese urbanisation in Beijing and Chengdu respectively. The 1990s can be perceived as a time of rapid development of the Chinese economy, especially with regards to real estate that has been referred to as above. Demolition in both films can be considered as a cultural metaphor that reflects the collapse of old buildings and transformation of a family and a city. Second, both films, though fictional, use documentary aesthetics to engage with social reality in order to reflect, record and construct the liveness in the process of urban demolition. Documentary aesthetics creates an aesthetic of presence, which emphasizes the physical co-presence of the camera, and provides a chance to contact with the material world closely. Third, both films are typical examples of urban cinema, with which the generation of

the post-1970s explore the genre's cinematic representation of nostalgia in the spheres of the cityscape, family, and social ethics. They address the post-1970s' anxieties relating to their dislocation in the cities and deconstruct the present with a conspicuous nostalgia.

From the aforementioned descriptions, I will analyse cinematic presentation of nostalgia in the films of *Shower* and *24 City* from three aspects: demolition, documentary aesthetics, and restorative/reflective nostalgia about the lifestyle in the post-socialist China. I attempt to explore how two urban generation filmmakers adopt a symbolic and cultural metaphor of demolition to record the development of the urban environment and how they represent their nostalgia and construct their identities.

### **Demolition: Tradition and Post-Socialist Modernity**

With the rapid development of urbanisation and housing reform since the 1990s, the topic of urban demolition, an important theme of contemporary Chinese film, has become increasingly appealing to Chinese filmmakers. Many visual works of urban cinema investigate the theme of urban demolition to represent this culture. This section explores the cinematic representations of urban demolition with a focus on the question: how do two filmmakers represent the themes of destruction and reconstruction in relation to the cityscape, family, and social ethics? Three dimensions will be discussed: the demolition of a building, the removal of a family, and the transformation of a city.

Zhang Yang's *Shower* begins with the narrative of a Shenzhen businessman, Da Ming, who returns home to Beijing where his father owns an old and traditional bathhouse. Da Ming stays for a couple of days and observes his father working as a social director, marriage counsellor, and dispute mediator for his customers. Da Ming is perplexed in two worlds: the decaying district that contains his memories of his childhood and community lifestyle in the past; the modern urban life in booming southern China where he now lives with his wife who does not want to meet with his family. After Da Ming reconciles with his ageing father, the father unexpectedly dies, leaving Da Ming to take care of his mentally disabled younger brother Er Ming. Da Ming gradually learns to accept responsibility and to recognize his affection for his father and

brother. At last, Da Ming takes stock of family while the bathhouse and much of the neighbourhood are torn down for Beijing Olympics in 2008.

The old bathhouse operated by Da Ming's father represents an old socialist lifestyle and its disappearing mirrors the tearing down of this 'traditional' lifestyle. In this bathhouse, the opera, Chinese chess, massage, and pedicure reflect traditional Chinese bathhouse cultures. At the same time, around the bathhouse, old buildings (*hutong*), early morning callisthenics, and talkative and humorous Beijing residents, to some extent, are the representatives of Beijing. The bathhouse is not only a business place but also a community which contains a particular form of social organisation based on small groups. As Zhang Zhen says, "community is seen as something that has been lost with modernity and as something that must be recovered. As a process dominated by state formation, modernity has allegedly destroyed the community" (4). In this quiet and peaceful atmosphere, the relationship among the people shows a harmonious state. Gerard Delanty argues that community is understood quite frequently as a form of nostalgia (111). In the film, Beijing's socialist collective communities provide a shared lifestyle and undertake a social duty to develop collective action. For example, the public bathhouse provides social organisational networks of kinship, friends, recreation, and a place to communicate. The film transposes Beijing culture into a bathhouse culture and many scenes of old and special architecture, streets, and public playgrounds are shown as representatives of community culture. Hence, this kind of lifestyle in the shower may be understood as a kind of community culture, and the relationship between community and metropolis can be perceived as the relationship between the local and global relations. To some extent, community culture in *Shower* is the yearning for the city's harmony and order and can be perceived as part of China's "plebeian public sphere", which is described by Wang Di when he investigates the function of the teahouse in Chengdu. Wang argues that "each street or neighbourhood had a teahouse that served as a kind of community centre where people got to know each other very well, sharing information about their work, families, happy and sad events. Someone who needed help might first ask his teahouse buddies for information or advice" (261). In *Shower*, the public bathhouse also has a similar social function: it is also used to

mediate the relationship between husband and wife, and becomes a sanctuary when someone avoids a creditor. Further, Wang indicates the social group of the teahouse was loosely formed, but still functioned as a social force which resisted the wave of modernity and uniformity along with the growing role of the state in public space and public life during the first half of the twentieth century (252). In other words, the teahouse was a self-community which maintained a small inner world when modernity and political ideology gradually imposed their influences. The public bathhouse exerts its social functions as a site of the sanctuary, relationship mediation, and information exchange. However, it cannot avoid a similar destiny to that of the teahouse in Chengdu, which faces large-scale urban demolition since the end of the 1990s.

The bathhouse culture has a distinct regional feature and local characteristic and presents a nonindustrial image of the past with intimate relationships. In contrast, the urban social movement not only focuses on the themes of demonstrations but also provides an opportunity to survey the expressions of community. David Bray regards the emergence of the “community” as a site of government in urban China since the mid-1990s, and it was the party-state that introduced the notion of using community (*shequ*) to distinguish the lowest notion of the “street offices” (*jiedao banshichu*) and “resident committees” (*juweihui*) (91). However, the community is also seen as a place where citizens share a common interest (Sigley 106), rather than an administrative entity. The reason why the local community is paid more and more attention is, to some extent, that some local communities are threatened to disappear as a result of globalisation. Therefore, it is an urgent task to represent such kinds of community for a common interest to recover and express personal and social identities in the historical context of the flexible economy and fragmented society. In other words, community and (post-socialist) modernity have an opposite relationship, which causes the discontinuity between the past and present. The filmmaker draws on the social situation of the bathhouse and constructs a nostalgic public place to narrate a story of primitive community life being converted into “modern” and industrial city life. This modernity is also stimulated by China join some international events, which facilitates the Chinese leadership and helps the city reconfirm its position as a universal force

for modernization (Haugen 158). However, far from disappearing, the community has a contemporary resonance in the current urban social situation while globalisation is gradually accepted by the public. The community appears to be a kind of resistant culture that has produced a worldwide search for roots, identity and aspirations of belonging. The public bathhouse then becomes fetishized for the sake of nostalgia, through which the old community lifestyle is presented.

In the film *Shower*, the feeling of nostalgia is invoked by the demolition of old urban buildings. The demolition becomes an urban cultural metaphor that yearns for the traditional relationship between father and son. More specifically, Shenzhen, compared to Beijing, is a young city that has developed at a fast speed. The character Da Ming is full of creative spirit like Shenzhen. At the beginning, the father (*Lao Liu*) cannot understand Da Ming's lifestyle; while Da Ming cannot accept the bathhouse culture either. The misunderstanding between them is a symbol of a generation gap in the context of post-socialist modernity since the 1990s. The relationship between father and son is an important theme in Zhang Yang's films such as *Spicy Love Soup* (1994), *Shower* (1998), *Quitting* (2001), and *Sunflower* (2005). In these films, the similar psychological structure of "resistance-compromise-understanding" from treachery to acceptance of the status of the father can be noticed. This psychological structure has its historical background that the period of the 1990s saw the tremendous changing social-cultural environment in China. As Li Yinghui argues, China's social structure and value develop into a period of diversification, which leads to mental confusion, loss, and anxiety to some extent (15). Some people attempt eagerly to regain the ideal traditional beliefs. So, Li Yinghui contends that looking for the father's social and cultural ideological existence conforms to the expectations of order in the popular cultural market (*ibid.*). This returning also can be understood from Dai Jinhua's suggestion that Chinese mainstream culture in the 1990s was influenced by Western cultures, and contemporary Chinese seems to be confused about their own culture (Dai 407). This confusion is depicted by Dai as "sights in the fog". Therefore, there is a feeling of loss and anxiety for some people in the trend of increasing urbanisation. Then, they start to yearn for a relatively stable value that is different from modern urban industrial

alienation in the aspects of emotion and culture. Through this yearning, the filmmaker wants to get into the consolation of home. This returning can be read as a metaphor of farewell to global commercialization and returning to socialist community life that pays more attention to the family bonds and values the relationship of the neighbourhood.

The demolition in the film *24 City* mainly depicts the transformation of factory 420 from 1958 to 2008. 420 is a military factory which manufactured aeroplanes for the state in Chengdu, Sichuan province. Factory 420 is pulled down to make way for multi-story buildings with luxury flats (also called 24 City). 420 tries to manufacture the appliances of television and fridge in the 1980s and 1990s to adapt to the reforms of Chinese politics and economy. Eventually, it fails and the original factory is purchased by a real estate company. 24 City refers to a commercial housing area which is built by a real estate company, China Resources (*Hua Run*). Accompanying the construction of 24 City, the demolition and transformation of 420, the state-owned enterprise, expresses the end of a period from 1958 to 2008. As a real military industrial enterprise that is mainly responsible for manufacturing aircraft for the state, 420 was relocated from Shenyang, a city in northern China, because of the policy that the important military enterprises should be relocated to the inner cities to support their economic development in 1958, given the background of the Cold War. In the film, most workers feel honoured to be part of 420 even though they were abandoned by the state and sacrificed a lot. For example, Da Li's child is lost on the way from Shenyang to Chengdu in 1958; although she expresses her regret and sadness, there is no resentment towards the state. Hou Lijun's experiences of being laid off and re-employed shape the background of the 420 structural reform. At the same time, she has only managed to see her parents three times over fifty years. However, she does not regret her choice and still feels optimistic about her life. Through their individual and incomplete narratives, the trajectory of 420 from thriving and being prosperous to fading is presented in the film.

The transformation of individuals also refers to some historical and collective events. For example, the state prepared for war in the period of the 1950s; the class struggle that happened in the Cultural Revolution; the battle of the Sino-Vietnamese War that happened in the late of the

1970s; the reforms of state-owned enterprises and the housing system that began from the 1980s. From these events, the transformation from the planned economy to the market economy is presented distinctly. Therefore, the transformation of 420 is not only the moving from an old place to a new one but also an expression of the economic and political transformation in the context of the post-socialist modernity.

Behind the transformation of 420 factory, the nine stories narrated in the feature film *24 City* are like stamps that record, reflect, and construct the whole life situation of the workers at 420 factory. Through these narratives, filmmaker Jia wants to express that the great time is imprinted in everyone's heart and what the society needs to do is listening to these people's missing, faith, and yearning that are based on the period of the post-socialism. Jia Zhangke argues that the nine narratives together in this film form a group, which brings a completed feeling about the 420 and depicts an epitome of privatization in the process of state-owned enterprise reform (2). Additionally, in "traditional" Chinese culture, the number nine means the whole. For example, nine states (*jiuzhou*) is a poetic name for China. From Jia's argument, this article claims that individual nostalgia is a form used to retain the collective memories. Jia's earlier films such as *Xiaowu* (1998), *Platform* (2000), and *Still Life* (2006) also have this characteristic. Jia attempts to resolve social issues through the tender feeling of nostalgia. Many scenes such as the demolition of the old factory and the construction of new residential buildings represent a kind of historical transformation, which contains the historical and realistic values. As Maurice Halbwachs puts, "there exists a collective memory and social frameworks for memory; it is to the extent that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks that it is capable of the action of recollection" (38). Furthermore, personal history, collective history, and social history are integrated closely. Personal history has a slight but intense symbolism, which presents a grand collective and society. The transformation of 420 means the end of one period and its substitute 24 City represents a new beginning. However, this beginning is full of uncertainty for some people who are experiencing the intense social transformation. The vanishing of the old socialist structures has left the protagonists in *24 City* with no access to their past. Jia grasps some

workers' anxiety about the future and represents the process of these people who are trying to get rid of the anxiety and find the meaning of existence.

The process of demolition has implications for time and history, and in this context, the urban films serve as a repository of space through personal and collective memories. Both films attempt to engage with the cities' memory and ascertain the trauma in the process of urban development. As a film trope, demolition does not simply reflect the contemporary urban social situation but plays a more important function in recording urban changes. At the end of the film *Shower*, Da Ming seems to recognise the importance of old community life, and reconciles the relationship with his father. However, it does not mean that Da Ming accepts the idea of his father and old community completely. His spiritual returning to the tradition that his father embraces is full of confusion. He is a generation of the post-1970s, most of whom were influenced by Mao's socialist ideology. However, the post-socialist society ruptures the traditional lifestyle. Returning to the past stubbornly seems not to be a good way to solve the issues of rupture between the past and post-socialist modernity. Hence, Da Ming, a modern people within active spirits, represents a sense of self-transformation in the context of the fractured and critical society.

Demolition in both films is not only an infrastructure construction and reconstruction but as a metaphor largely reflects the choice between socialist lifestyle and the post-socialist modernity for some post-1970s individuals. From this perspective, nostalgia is a characteristic of modernity which is a reaction to the cultural rupture of tradition and post-socialist modernity. Both films offer the socialist lifestyle as a self-reaffirming panacea to relieve the anxiety that the economic and social transformation brought about in post-socialist China.

### **Documentary Aesthetics: History and Authenticity**

Nostalgia is not only represented as a central theme in urban films, it also brings about the changes of the film language. In this part, I suggest that both filmmakers use documentary aesthetics in feature films to construct their individual group identities. There are two reasons for both films to adopt this aesthetic form. First, as new filmmakers, many

urban generation filmmakers are independent and do not have the budget of large production studios. For example, Jia Zhangke's first film *Xiaowu* (1998) was made with a budget of just 300,000 RMB (around \$36,000) ("Jia Zhangke"), which was difficult to produce a feature film. Adopting formal features of the documentary genre can achieve their desire of filmmaking on a small budget. Therefore, Jia adopted a lot of full-length shots and documentary aesthetics. Second, the new generation filmmakers primarily intend to record what happened around themselves and shot the ordinary lives of individuals. So, documentary aesthetics meets their criteria for the production of art. This aesthetic pursuit also creates a new film movement, the new documentary movement:

This cinema attempts to record and interpret the collective relationship to the ordinary people around their friends, family members, neighbours, colleagues, as well as strangers, who inhabit or come to inhabit the ever-expanding social and material space of the cities, be they large or small, metropolitan centres or provincial capitals [...] the documentary form is inspiring to find the shape and meaning of a multifaceted social experience in the era of transformation. The documentary method is instrumental in laying bare the oscillation between representation and actuality and in foregrounding the subject-object relation between the filmmaker and his or her subject matter so as to create a more intersubjective or democratic cinema. (Zhang 18)

Therefore, both fictional films use documentary techniques to record what is happening in the city. In *Shower*, in the last attempt to keep a memento of their neighbourhood, nostalgia sets at the moment of the city disappearing, and it encourages urban residents to take a camcorder to chronicle the process of demolition. As Luke Robinson suggests, "the sense of being on the scene" (*xianchang*) is an aesthetic of presence, which emphasises the physical compresence of camera and subject during these very moments of collapse. Robinson further says, "liveness brings us into direct contact with the material world, rather than being a product of representation's inevitable distance from the extradiegetic" (138). Both visual media are feature films and use the documentary form to focus on neglected spots and isolated individuals in the modernising cities. The aesthetics of the sense of liveness provides the films with a

perspective to construct a sense of reality and to make sense of what is happening in some Chinese cities.

*Shower*, as a commercial film, takes up the task of home videos, distributes the images of urban change and shows the loss entailed in demolition. It eagerly preserves images of the city at the background of the rapid urbanisation of the post-Maoist era. Documentary aesthetics, a planning practice and a cinematic strategy, preserves pictures of the disappearing socialist city. The filmmakers have exhibited a documentary impulse for preserving the city. To some extent, the film becomes an extension of the camcorder's homemade, intimate footage of the old Beijing neighbourhood at the moment of its disappearance. It demonstrates the importance of some urban cinemas as records and evidence of a disappearing social environment.

The urban film chronicles urban transformation and the metamorphosis of twentieth-century cities. Further, in *24 City*, Jia Zhangke extends the understanding of documentary aesthetics what is happening in the city to a deeper interpretation, that is, how to investigate fiction and reality. *24 City* is a feature film which records the privatization reform of a state-owned factory from 1958 to 2008 through documenting nine workers: five of these are real members of the factory's workforce, while four are fictional characters played by actors. The film's narrative is a blend of fictive and documentary story-telling. For history, people do not always form a consensus. In this case, the real people's narratives and records represent the real existence. Jia says frankly that he has an intense critical consciousness about old factory system because many people pay a heavy price for the 420 factory. Primarily, as Jia says, he wants to shoot a film about the painful memories of 420 factory and that special era (6). Hence, he chooses interviewees who have the commonsense moment, such as heartrending memories about that period. With the deepening of the investigation, however, Jia realizes that the original intention of filmmaking is not "real" (Jia 20). This is because many workers do not complain about the factory and the old system; rather, they express a desire to maintain the original system (ibid.). Based on Jia's investigation, it is reasonable to suggest that the interviewees as representatives of many other workers of 420 factory still adhere to the original faith of their youth and the choices they made in

the context of socialist China. Rather than reading their narratives in *24 City* as kinds of complaint about socialism, it is better to understand their feeling as harbouring for socialism. Hence, the story of 420 factory has gradually become a metaphor that expresses workers' missing of a special period.

Although *24 City* adopts the documentary aesthetics to narrate the structure, the fictional parts still remind audiences that *24 City* is a docudrama rather a documentary. For example, Joan Chen, the actress, plays a woman called Gu Minhua in this film. Gu Minhua tells audiences that her experiences are similar to the eponymous female protagonist of the film *Xiao Hua* (1979), a role also played by Joan Chen. Robinson claims that “in *24 City*, the actor is ordinary people, and history itself appears almost as a form of performance. Off-camera interjections are thus one of a panoply of techniques used to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction, with the consequence that only a contextual understanding can help even an engaged viewer distinguish between the two” (154). Therefore, as Sebastian Veg suggests, though Jia's 'reality' in this sense is different from the material reality which documentary presents, that fictional narrative also bridges to reality (58–64). In other words, these blurred relations between fiction and reality create a kind of augmented reality which enables his film to present the universality through some fictional individual cases.

The film narrates the history of 420 factory and the destiny of ordinary people from 1958 to 2008 to present the individual's life and the collective history. It does not try to provide historical facts, but rather provides a possible historical experience that includes the elements of reality and, at the same time, constructs the reality. As Jia suggests, “history in film is comprised by truth and image, and *24 City* is a story about loss which cannot be seen again in reality” (249).<sup>2</sup> Therefore, this aesthetic pursuit reveals that some new documentary films do not simply reflect reality, but are rather a form of questioning the ‘truth’ that is manifested in these films. In *24 City*, the fictional parts that are

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<sup>2</sup> Translated from Chinese-language source by the article author.

represented through documentary aesthetics are beneficial to make sense of the complex historical experience and to present an innermost truth of characters about the social transformation from 1958 to 2008. Hence, *24 City* provides an experiment that fiction and constructed reality can cooperate in creating lived space and imagined historical time.

Overall, *24 City* doubtlessly awakens many Chinese people's collective memory and the fictional aspects may inspire some people to judge their life again. Through professional and non-actor's performance, the film wants to convey the message that everyone should confront their lives straight. *Shower* and *24 City* use urban themes for focusing on the past and the present. This aesthetics of filmmaking demonstrates that video technology can be mobilised to express the individual and collective memory. The discussion in this section maps out the cities' spaces as indexes of memory, which gives visual form to expose individuals' feelings about urban development. By chronicling the process leading to the construction of the worker's demise and the death of the old city, Zhang Yang and Jia Zhangke's films, to some extent, resist the forgetting of the urban past and becomes a kind of carrier through which memory can survive.

### **Reflective/Restorative Nostalgia**

In the third part, this article analyses nostalgia itself from the perspectives of reflective and restorative nostalgia, which will not only connect and summarise the former parts but also suggests that this structure of feeling belongs to the generation of the 1970s, especially for many urban generation filmmakers.

Svetlana Boym investigates Russian culture after the fall of the Soviet Union and distinguishes two types of nostalgia. She defines restorative nostalgia as "reconstructive" and "utopian", in contrast to reflective nostalgia, which she defines as "inconclusive" and "ironic" (42). In other words, restorative nostalgia is more linked to the concept of home, which dreams of fully rebuilding a mythical authentic home and bridges a perceived gap between the past and the present. Meanwhile, reflective nostalgia pays more attention to the concept of displacement, which is interested in bringing the displacement without trying to

rebuild it. Both definitions as contemporary cultural styles cannot be separated completely and often mediate between the poles of the yearning for home and the displacement.

Nostalgia in Zhang Yang's *Shower* can be understood as a kind of reflective nostalgia. The difference between Da Ming and his father Lao Liu can be perceived as two kinds of lifestyles: socialist and post-socialist. Lao Liu owns an old and traditional bathhouse and works as a social director, marriage counsellor, and dispute mediator for his customers; Da Ming presents the modern urban life that is situated in booming southern China. However, he is perplexed in two worlds when he communicates with Lao Liu and Er Ming. Da Ming gradually relieves his puzzle and accepts Lao Liu's lifestyle when he lives together with Lao Liu for several days. After Lao Liu unexpectedly dies, he undertakes his father's responsibility to look after the bathhouse and Er Ming. To some extent, Da Ming's puzzle can be interpreted as a kind of discontinuity between the socialist past and the present commercial urban life, which is envisioned as a radical break, a shift from party-centred public life to individual-centred consumerism. Thus, the rupture between a remembered collective past and an individual present seems entirely unbridgeable. The process of mediating the relationship between Lao Liu and Da Ming is a spiritual negotiation. Essentially, it is about how to deal with the controversial lifestyle between socialist and post-socialist. This historical and political displacement may be a permanent fracture. Hence, this discontinuity makes the film *Shower* become a reflective rather than restorative nostalgia film.

Compared to *Shower*, nostalgia in *24 City* can be seen as a restorative nostalgia, which invokes the past in order to forge continuity across fifty years of discontinuity. The story depicts the transformation of factory '420' from 1958 to 2008. As a military factory which manufactures aeroplane for the state, factory 420 is pulled down to make way for buildings of luxury flats: 24 City. The period of 420 can be divided into two eras: socialism (1958–78) and post-socialism (1979–2008). This film tries to eliminate the gap between two eras and builds a sense of a continuity rather than a jarring disjuncture between the more recent communist past and the consumerist present (Castells 190). More specifically, Jia mainly depicts restorative nostalgia from three aspects.

First, the memory of each interviewee is a representative of one period, which abstractly records a special history. For example, a middle-aged man visits his mentor, who is now elderly. This scene expresses the feeling of respect and gratitude for the first-generation workers who fought for the country. Many first-generation workers bring their family to Chengdu with the relocation of the factory. They have once benefited but now are dropped from the factory protection. In another scene, a female worker Gu Minghua, who is proud of her beauty when she was young, is now near 45 years old and feels regret and contradictory emotions about the past times. In the end, Su Na who is 26 years old speaks about her business as a purchasing agent. She expresses her optimistic life attitude and feels sad for her parents' generation as employees of 420. The film follows three generations' memories in Chengdu (in the 1950s, the 1970s and the present) to express the changing process of the individuals, factory, and the whole country. Particularly, Hou Lijun lost her work and just had 200RMB every month in the context of state-owned factory reform. Da Li lost her child in 1958 when 420 moved to Chengdu and she had to give up looking for her child because 420 was a military factory and she must perform her job as a soldier. In these interviews, Gu Minghua, Hou Lijun, and Da Li speak out their bitterness, which not only shows the sufferings about the past but also reflects the social transformations such as the wave of redundancies happened in the 1990s, which were ignored by the authorities and the mainstream society. Therefore, it is also a euphemistic criticism of the national and political indifference and even oppression.

Second, the filmmaker adopts one poem at the end of every interview, which is another form to structure its restorative nostalgia. For example, when Song Weidong stands at the playground with his basketball and watches the camera silently after finishing the interview, William Butler Yeats's *The Coming of Wisdom with Time* emerges on the screen: "though leaves are many, the root is one. Through all the lying days of my youth, I swayed my leaves and flowers in the sun; now I may wither into the truth" (43). At another interview, when Gu Minghua narrates her experience as the most beautiful woman of the factory at her period, Cao Xueqin's poem expresses her sadness and nostalgia: "I feel quite nerve-

racking for I like spring and feel sad when it is leaving.”<sup>3</sup> This poem explains the contradiction about the time when a once beautiful girl feels the time is flowing quickly and is worried about her future. At the same time, the regret expressed in this poem goes beyond nostalgia and may be read as a further euphemistic criticism of post-socialist China. The world that the poem presents is sentimental and imaginary. However, as Ouyang Jianghe explains, Jia is a poet, who uses the film to present an accurate representation of the world (Lv 2). Indeed, the poems in the film cooperate with other film languages to create a flexible world in which Jia is able to explore individual and collective yearning, desire, regret and criticism.

Third, the music, sometimes, is more sentimental and intense to express the theme of the film. The music in *24 City* is an expression and conclusion about every interviewer. In general, the music is linked to each narrative. For example, when interviewing a reporter of Chengdu television station who grows up at the factory 420 in the early 1980s, the music *outside world* (1987) is sung by famous Taiwanese singer Qi Qin, and it sings “in a long time ago, you own me and I own you. Then, someday, you leave me for your dream” (Qi). The lyric echoes with the story to depict the generation of 70s fighting for their dream and their hesitation for the future. As Philip Drake suggests, the work of the soundtrack connects with the memorialised knowledge to establish the retro feelings of the period. This takes on a symbolic function in establishing the relationships between characters and their nostalgia (Drake 193). Thus, the soundtrack may stimulate people to recall their past that is situated at the period of the 1970s and 1980s. This constructed feeling in *24 City* may help people make sense of their characters and present situation.

At the same time, the two types of nostalgia are also overlapped in both films. It means that focusing on the discontinuity between two eras

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<sup>3</sup> Cao Xueqing is a poet of Qing Dynasty. This poem comes from his novel *A Dream in Red Mansions* and is translated by the article author from Chinese-language sources: *guai nong di shi bei shangshen, ban wei lianchun ban naochun*.

might also be a restorative nostalgia approach. For example, in the film *Shower*, the father Lao Liu is a representative of traditional Beijing community. Da Ming tries to understand his father and community life, which is a kind of return. Additionally, there are two scenes to depict water in *Shower*. The two inserted sequences take the audience first to the ancient yellow land and then to a Tibetan holy lake. The water is metaphorically referred to as a cultural soul, which baptises and purifies human relations. The interpretation of two allegories can be perceived as a return to the Fifth Generation's "national allegory" (Fredric 65). At the same time, father's voiceover and cinematic flashback depict a bathing sequence, the mise-en-scène of the yellow plateau shares a cultural code with Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* (1984). This presentation reveals an active connection with prior film directors and their film aesthetics. *24 City* also has a similar connection. For instance, some younger workers express their helplessness and disappointment when they are facing the transformation of the 420 factory. When a woman of the third-generation of the factory talks about her memories about the 420 factory, her fancy and yearning about the future will not be interpreted as restorative nostalgia for socialism. Although she understands her parents' faith about 420 and socialism, she expresses more yearning for her future. Besides, the presentation of the skyscrapers repeatedly in *24 City* also provides a shorthand visual and narrative symbol to imply individual commercial identity in a cosmopolitan inner city. Therefore, the concepts do provide a useful schematic for identifying two distinct nostalgic tendencies in the Chinese cinema since the 1990s.

Through analysing nostalgia, the intrusive social change and the intense rebuilding of the post-socialist cities are investigated. A linkage with a communist past and a community lifestyle is represented. Two films present the city as the battleground between oppressive collectivity and rebellious individuals and give voice to the urban generation filmmakers who grow up in the cities and are familiar with the characters such as small business owners and entertainers that appear in their films. For these urban generation filmmakers, they represent nostalgia and construct their individual group identities. They engage with the society and use film as a means to express their complicated feeling. Therefore, these filmmakers are agents who not only work with

their subjects but also help to produce more agents, films, to identify themselves. At this point, as Luke Robinson suggests, “the act of filming has become a co-production, one in which the process of documenting reality merges with the process of creating and performing a situation into being” (Robinson 147). Therefore, nostalgia may become a part of a collective imagination through shared media representation. The feeling of nostalgia in *Shower* and *24 City* is related to the emotion of desire and fantasy about hometown, love, history, identity and future. The discontinuity between the tough and desired past, the commercial city of the present, and a separated future generated a radical break, which all happen against the historical background of booming modernity. As Robin Visser argues, the built environment is not an autonomous realm, but rather an economic and social field with important political implications (4). The films map out the cities’ memory, expose the material wounds, and negotiate with the authority of urban development.

### **Conclusion**

This article has investigated how two urban generation filmmakers represent their nostalgia in Chinese urban film in the context of post-socialist Chinese cities. It highlights that some cultural ruptures have presented a kind of controversial feeling for urban residents in the process of Chinese post-socialist modernity. This article argues that the filmmakers focus on the cultural memory in the urban film to not simply reflect contemporary social issues, but also foreground the role of filmmaking in constructing the urban image and their identities as urban filmmakers.

As two representatives of the urban filmmakers, Zhang Yang and Jia Zhangke actively express their expectation, desire, and anxiety about the circumstance that they live. Their perspectives are consciously more than the didactic tradition of Chinese cinema to moral judgment but use critical realism aesthetics to investigate society. If restorative nostalgia means to search for home, which is evident when the workers are compelled to leave their native towns, thus, factory 420 becomes the promise of a new home for them under socialism. As Wu Shu-chin puts it, individuals are to participate in the common destiny, in all-embracing

structures of community inside of the factory 420. However, it voices the anguish and despair of ordinary people as an effect of politics (17). A more profound interpretation is that *24 City* “signals an awareness of both the failures of the Maoist era and the rise of ‘desperate individualisms’ in post-socialist China” (Deppman 260). Today, the home has disappeared with the coming of post-socialist modernity. This historical process has been adopted by urban filmmakers to express complex feelings about the socialist collective community and urban life that have disappeared in urban demolition. The film language of urban cinema provides filmmakers with a flexible platform on which to engage with the shared historical moment, and produces a thoughtful approach to investigate reality and history.

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