

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. This paper explores how the female protagonist in Zhangke Jia's film *Mountains May Depart* embodies emotional displacement, identity dissolution, and cultural rupture through the lens of feminist film theory and socio-historical narrative analysis. By integrating private emotional experience with structural critique, the film traces the protagonist Tao Shen's evolving subjectivity across the years 1999, 2014, and 2025. Through camera techniques, temporal dis-junctions, and the nuanced body expressions, the film articulates memory, trauma, and loss not only at the individual 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 intersect within the dynamics of tradition, socio-historical transformations, modernity and globalization.

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

1. Introduction

In the history of 21st-century Chinese cinema, Zhangke Jia's *Mountains May Depart* [1] emerges as a pivotal cinematic text that poignantly captures the intersection of individual destiny and the rupture and reconstruction of socio-cultural structures during periods of social transformation. Through 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 upheaval serve as an intimate lens through which broader social change is reflected. By mapping the heroine's personal affective narratives onto macro-level socio-historical shifts, the film offers a nuanced presentation of the fragmentation of personal experience within the context of China's socio-historical transformation.

Traditional theories of historical narrative have primarily emphasized collective memory and structural transformation [2], while feminist film theory critically examines gendered power

dynamics [3], female subjectivity, and the politics of vision [4]. This paper seeks to synthesize these two theoretical frameworks by placing female subjectivity at the center of analysis. Through the prism of personal emotional experience, it investigates how women perceive, record, and endure historical ruptures in *Mountains May Depart*.

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

Unlike traditional cinema, in which women are represented primarily as passive objects of gaze and desire, the establishment of a female subjectivity signifies a departure from this passive role of being gazed and desired. The initial step toward constructing a female subject perspective is for women to transcend their objectified status under the gaze of others, thereby asserting self-awareness and emotional autonomy, and emerging as active narrative and gazing subjects.

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. This involves using cinematic language to foreground women's inner feelings, psychological dynamics, and emotional flux. Bell Hooks further expands this conceptual framework in *The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators* [5], introducing a deeper, more nuanced level of "oppositional gaze," which articulates women's critical consciousness and resistance. Additionally, Judith Butler, in *Gender Trouble* [6], contributes significantly by problematizing and historicizing the concept of gender itself, thus providing a richer cultural and historical foundation that imbues female subjectivity with characteristics of constructivity and fluidity. Consequently, the establishment of the female subjectivity is far from a vague or abstract notion; it is underpinned by a clearly delineated theoretical framework. On a visual level, it represents a shift from being gazed upon to actively gazing; narratively, it transitions from passivity to dominance; and in terms of identity, it moves from historical singularity to contemporary multiplicity.

2.1. Construction of Tao Shen's subject 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 emotional relationship break 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 huge 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 subject 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 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 makes extensive use of long takes and static shots to underscore Tao Shen's introspection and the visual agency. 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 without the interruption of rapid cuts. This temporal elongation resists the fast-paced, consumptive patterns encouraged by the male gaze and instead immerses the viewer in Tao Shen's subjective world. It invites the audience to experience the rhythm of her emotional life and her responses to her personal history.

In addition, the film constructs a position of equality and empathy between the viewer and Tao Shen through its careful orchestration of camera angles. The camera frequently adopts a level or slightly low-angle perspective in relation to Tao Shen, fostering a visual stance of empathy, respect, and parity. Such framing resists objectification; it positions Tao Shen not merely as an object of narrative action but more importantly as a perceptual and emotional subject. The viewer is invited to share in her perception of time's passage and to experience, alongside her, the affective contours of her life.

Zhangke Jia is particularly adept at using spatial language to evoke emotional states. In his film, expansive and depopulated environments are 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 dynamic 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, while also emphasizing her vulnerability and resistance within the sweeping forces of social and historical change. Space, in this cinematic context, becomes an externalized image of the female subject's inner experience. Through these subtle visual strategies, Tao Shen emerges not only as a narrative figure but as the emotional core of the film's representational framework. The film thereby effectively deconstructs the logic of the male gaze and constructs, in its place, a cinematic mechanism for emotional expression and female agency. In doing so, it also opens a space 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, detached from collective history; instead, 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 analyzing how personal narratives and traumas, when represented in cinema, become conduits for engaging with and interpreting collective historical experience.

3.1. The simultaneous fracture of emotion and social transformation

The film's tripartite temporal structure spans a broad arc of Chinese history—from the late phase of the planned economy to the full emergence of global capitalism. 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 during the period of economic transition. Against the backdrop of early marketization and emerging class stratification, female romantic agency becomes entangled in economic expectations and shifting social value systems. 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 long shots and spatial compositions that highlight the triangular tension between the main characters, the film visualizes how individual agency is constrained by social architecture. Tao Shen emerges as both an agent of personal choice and a subject acted upon by the larger historical tensions of her time.

Tao Shen's marital breakdown in 2014 and her estrangement from her son operate in a similarly layered fashion. While on the surface this rupture appears as a personal crisis—the emotional detachment between husband and wife—it also reflects the shifting functionality of the family as a social unit. Tao Shen, whose worldview is rooted in traditional emotional ethics, finds herself increasingly alienated 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 bond, but a dismantling of familial identity, maternal 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 might be called a social and affective exile. The film intensifies this emotional dislocation through extended takes, empty frames, and ambient silence, presenting the dilemma of contemporary women in the disintegration of their families and the dissolution of their identities. In this sense, Tao Shen becomes emblematic of the silent wounds inflicted upon female subjects during periods of profound social transformation.

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.

Her solitary dance, unlike the layered narrative configuration seen at the film's opening, has no audience and no social referent. It becomes a private dialogue between self and memory, unfolding in the register of solitude. These repeated gestures are not merely residual bodily habits from the cultural remnants, but also serve as forms of mourning for lost identity. At this stage, Tao Shen carries the multilayered burden of cultural displacement, maternal rupture, and existential drift—all embedded within the larger structures of globalization. Her emotional experience cannot be relegated to the realm of individual feeling alone. Rather, it is the manifestation of historical and social mechanisms that have invaded the private sphere. Tao Shen's loneliness is not purely personal; it is a hollowing out of affect, left in the wake of 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

Cathy Caruth [8] argues that traumatic events are often not fully grasped at the moment of occurrence; instead, they enter the unconscious in an unresolved state and thus resist articulation through linear or coherent language. *Mountains May Depart* adopts a fragmented narrative structure—produced through its non-linear, temporal leaps—that breaks away from the logic of chronological storytelling. This fragmentation not only reflects the psychic disorientation brought about by socio-historical rupture but also mirrors the non-linear, disjointed nature of traumatic memory. One of the most emotionally charged and symbolically dense scenes in the film occurs in 2025, when Tao Shen quietly prepares dumplings. On the surface, it appears to be a traditional domestic act. Yet at a deeper level, it marks the intersection of cultural memory rupture, maternal identity loss, and the repetition of emotional trauma. As Maurice Halbwachs points out in *On Collective Memory* [9], when collective memory collapses, the individual may still enact residual rituals to maintain fragments of cultural imagery. Tao Shen's dumpling-making is rendered mechanical and hollow, accompanied by a hallucinated voice of her son calling out to her. The act of wrapping dumplings becomes a residual ritual devoid of communal significance, sustained only by the body's memory. In this sense, the act of cooking is no longer functional; it becomes a residual ritual, a bodily inscription of loss. Tao Shen is not feeding others but preserving, through corporeal repetition, the trauma of identity dissolution and emotional rupture.

Tao Shen's solitary dance in 2025 is not merely a flashback to her youthful memories from 1999, but a traumatic corporeal echo shaped by the weight of her lived experience. Her movements in the snow are slow and rigid, her clothing in chromatic dissonance with the pale winter landscape. In the distance, the unchanging Wenfeng Pagoda looms—a silent witness to the passage of time—highlighting her physical aging and emotional solitude. These visual elements collectively construct a vivid representation of traumatic memory. Within narratives of female trauma, the body often becomes the site through which repressed emotions find expression. In the film, Tao Shen's dance is thus transformed into a form of embodied response to fractured identities, familial dissolution, and cultural displacement. From this perspective, she is not so much dancing as she is remembering—resisting the erasure of her history through embodied memory. In this sense, corporeal memory functions as a crucial intermediary between private affect and collective history. Through her physical repetition and nostalgic gesture, Tao Shen not only recalls but bears witness to the ruptures of family, society, and cultural continuity. Her body becomes a living archive, and the dance a form of emotional historiography—an act of remembering that turns the personal into a site of 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 endowed with precisely such a function. Tao Shen's bodily transformation—from youth to old age—becomes a physiological record of socio-historical change. Her solitude, silence, and physical aging mirror the disintegration of the social fabric. From this perspective, the body is no longer merely a medium for individual experience; it becomes a sensor and expressive apparatus for registering historical rupture. This repositions bodily presence as central to the deep entanglement of personal affect 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 relational systems fail, the body assumes 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 bodily acts 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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