

## Portrayals of Marginalized Women in Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Works

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### ABSTRACT

Feminist theories gained prominence in the West as early as the 1960s, progressively impacting film criticism. It was only in the 1990s that Western feminist theory began to permeate Chinese academic realms, including film studies and theory. Despite this introduction, feminism did not significantly alter the traditional gender hierarchy in Chinese cinema, where female characters frequently assume roles subordinate to their male counterparts. Jia Zhangke, a notable figure from the sixth generation of Chinese directors, is neither a female director nor a feminist scholar with a focus on women's studies. Nevertheless, his oeuvre reflects a contemplation of women's issues and adopts a relatively equitable perspective in portraying female characters. This paper examines the depiction of marginalized women in Jia Zhangke's films and their transition from the 'Other' to the 'Subject'. Additionally, it delves into how his films contribute to the generation of feminist discourse and explore the role of cinema in reinforcing female ideologies. Using qualitative analysis, this paper analyses the representation of marginalised women in Jia Zhangke's three films through the theory of the male gaze, with the aim of demonstrating that as women's influence increases, their role will gradually evolve from being seen as 'the other' or a male appendage to being recognised as a 'subject' with a sense of self. Ultimately, after overcoming the established gender hierarchy of the "other", the female characters do not confront or antagonise the male subject, but rather help other women to establish themselves as true female subjects.

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### KEYWORDS:

Jia Zhangke's Cinema  
Female characters  
Feminine Self-awareness

### CITATION:

Liuxuan Yan, Marlenny Deenerwan, & Raja Farah Raja Hadayadanin. (2024). Portrayals of Marginalized Women in Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Works. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities (MJSSH)*, 9(5), e002817.  
<https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v9i5.2817>

**Contribution/Originality:** The primary contribution of this article is its unique analysis of the transformation of marginal female characters from "other" to "subject" in Jia Zhangke's films. This study enriches existing literature on marginal women and offers new insights into gender dynamics and subjectivity in contemporary Chinese

cinema.

## 1. Introduction

Jia Zhangke, a seminal figure in China's sixth generation of filmmakers, has been recognized with the Best Director Award at the Venice Film Festival, affirming his distinguished contributions to cinema (Nie, 2021). Over the course of more than two decades, Jia Zhangke's creative oeuvre has consistently focused on narratives centered around the underclass, particularly highlighting the resilience and survival of marginalized individuals within Chinese society, with an emphatic focus on marginalized women. This thematic emphasis showcases the inherent vitality and strength found within women (Hu, 2023). Jia Zhangke's work meticulously documents and reflects upon the societal conditions of 21st-century China through the social contexts of his characters. His portrayal of women, especially marginalized women, is notably distinctive, often exploring the evolution of women's consciousness and the intrinsic redemptive quality of women's maternal essence, not just for men but for society at large (Yan, 2021). Thus, analyzing and interpreting the transformation of marginalized women's portrayal in Jia Zhangke's films presents a novel and insightful academic inquiry.

Marginalized women, identified as a distinct cohort within the wider female demographic, play integral roles as constituents and participants in societal dynamics, yet their presence is frequently overlooked and neglected (Indira, 2020). Feminist scholars, notably Beauvoir, have highlighted the relegated status of women as the 'Other' within the societal hierarchy, a situation that is markedly exacerbated in the case of marginalized women (Edwards, 2021). These women encompass not only those of lower socioeconomic status but also those who are sidelined by prevailing patriarchal ideologies that permeate the social fabric (Schoonheim, 2023). An examination of marginalized women through the lens of Jia Zhangke's three emblematic films offers insights into the broader challenges faced by China's underprivileged female segments in their pursuit of gender equality and personal autonomy, along with the intrinsic values they embody. It is noteworthy that marginalized women, despite being a focal point in Jia Zhangke's cinematography, have been relatively underexplored in academic discourse. Therefore, this study's focus on marginal women is innovative and of research significance as a new perspective in the study of Jia Zhangke's films. In addition, it helps to awaken the self-consciousness of the marginal women in the society under the regulation and realise the reasonable demands of women.

Grounded in the theory of the male gaze, this paper selects the portrayal of marginalized women in Jia Zhangke's films as its focal point of research. It aims to investigate the catalysts behind the evolution of marginalized women's roles from traditional "Other" to self-aware "Subject" statuses. This exploration encompasses an analysis of the diverse depictions of marginalized women, their conditions of marginalization, and their journey from traditional "Other" roles towards becoming self-conscious "Subjects" within Zhangke's cinematic universe. By scrutinizing the various representations of marginalized women in his films, their state of marginalization, and the factors contributing to their role transformation from traditional "Others" to self-aware "Subjects," this study endeavors to shed light on the evolving portrayal of female figures in Jia Zhangke's oeuvre. Ultimately, this paper seeks to elucidate the shifting statuses

and roles of women in contemporary Chinese cinema and the implications of these transformations for enhancing women's consciousness.

### 1.1. Problem Statement

Within the annals of Chinese cinema, female characters have frequently been depicted as marginalized entities, particularly within traditional social and cultural contexts that often relegate women to positions subordinate to male characters (Jorge, 2023). Nevertheless, these marginalized female characters have experienced considerable transformation as societal evolution and shifts in cultural perceptions have taken place (Rohman, 2013). This transformation is notably apparent in the films of Jia Zhangke. In his cinematographic works, women are not subjected to a patriarchal gaze nor are they eroticized. Instead, they are depicted with an intent to convey and represent women's own destinies, values, and psychological nuances. In essence, Jia Zhangke's films document the journey of marginalized women from their traditional status as the 'other' to becoming independent subjects. This metamorphosis not only mirrors the changing status of women but also signifies the evolution of broader societal cultural concepts. Such a mode of filmic expression, diverging from traditional gender norms, holds significant progressive relevance. This study is aiming to answer the following critical questions;

- i. How are marginalised women portrayed in Jia Zhangke's films?
- ii. What causes the transformation of these characters from "other" to "subject"?
- iii. What is the significance of this transformation for understanding the status and role of women in contemporary Chinese society?

By conducting a detailed examination of the depiction and evolution of marginalized women in Jia Zhangke's films, this study offers novel insights into the portrayal of gender within Chinese cinema. Additionally, it enriches the broader discourse on gender roles and the progression towards gender equality within Chinese society. Such contributions are invaluable for furthering the social imperative of gender equality and fostering a more nuanced and profound comprehension of women's experiences and representations.

## 2. Literature Review

The term feminism was first coined by Hubertine Auclert (Schor, 2022) to demand that women should be granted equal rights with men. De Gouges (2021) advocated for the eradication of all forms of male privilege. The awakening of women's consciousness did not significantly unfold until the 19th century, leading to the emergence of three feminism waves, as detailed by Mohajan (2022). The first wave, spanning the late 19th and early 20th centuries, was influenced by the French Revolution, prompting women to initiate a liberation movement aimed at establishing gender equality (Marino & Ware, 2022). The 1960s saw the advent of the second wave, which highlighted the differences and asserted the superiority of women over men, heralding the 'New Feminism' era and the development of numerous feminist ideologies (Das & Arjunan, 2021). Commencing in the 1980s, the third wave expanded the feminist movement to incorporate Black and Third World women, emphasizing individuality and the critique of negative gender stereotypes to dismantle patriarchal oppression and achieve 'human liberation' (Ntshangase, 2021).

Within the context of feminist discourse, marginalized women represent a pivotal segment of the female demographic, positioned at the "centre" in contrast to the prevailing societal dominance (Hamer, 2023). Sociological theory categorizes individuals into two distinct groups based on social status disparities: the centre and the margins (Crosby, 2022), with marginalized women constituting a significant portion of the latter. The concept of marginalized individuals was initially introduced by Kurt Lewin, leading to a tripartite classification that has gained broad acceptance within the academic community (Zhang & Liu, 2021). For the purposes of this discussion, marginalized women are defined according to the third category: individuals of lower social standing, residing at the societal hierarchy's nadir, and unable to assimilate into the societal mainstream (Locatelli, 2023). The evolution of feminist thought has progressively highlighted the study of marginalized women as a critical area of inquiry, particularly within the realms of literature and film, thereby broadening the scope and depth of scholarly investigation.

The concept of the "Other" was articulated by the feminist thinker de Beauvoir, who classified women as "Others" in relation to men, the "subjects" (De Beauvoir, 2023). Beauvoir, as cited by Pickard (2023), posits that the 'subject' occupies a primary position, whereas the 'Other' is deemed secondary. She further contends that women are designated as the Other from birth, a marginalized identity that influences every aspect of their lives, from their familial settings to their educational experiences (Mookherjee, 2016). While this perspective may seem radical, it is an incontrovertible fact that, within traditional cultural and social frameworks, women often assume identity roles dominated and dictated by men. Moreover, in patriarchal societies, women gradually perceive themselves as the 'Other,' subordinate to males, thereby diminishing their sense of self-subjectivity. This dynamic is illustrated in certain literary works and films, where "she" is portrayed as the subordinate entity, the inessential contrasted with the essential (De Beauvoir, 2023). The female characters in the early films of Jia Zhangke vividly embody the image of the Other. Notably, characters such as Zhao, Ma, QiaoQiao, and Shen represent the ordinary individuals upon whom the director's lens is focused, offering an objective portrayal of these women as marginalized entities within society (Mello, 2022). It is particularly noteworthy that characters like Ma in *"Still Life"* and Zhao in *"Unknown Pleasure"* exemplify the notion of "otherness" as proposed by Beauvoir, serving as quintessential depictions of this concept.

Concurrently, there was a notable awakening of female consciousness. Accompanied by the widespread women's movement, the conventional dependency role of women on men began to evolve, with a majority of women increasingly developing a sense of subject consciousness (Rakow, 2022). Qu (2023) defines female subject consciousness as the deliberate recognition by women of their status, role, and value within the objective world. Consequently, women have progressively transitioned from being the marginalized 'Other' in traditional patriarchal societies to actively engaging in various social activities (Jenkins, 2023). In the context of the burgeoning women's rights movement and the expansion of feminist ideology, the films of Jia Zhangke strive to challenge the traditional, stereotypical representation of women, particularly those portraying ordinary, marginalized female characters. An examination of Jia Zhangke's cinematography reveals that the marginalized female protagonists undergo a transformation from the 'Other' to the 'Subject', alongside the gradual awakening of feminist consciousness.

From the perspective of scholarly inquiry, research on marginalized women depicted in Jia Zhangke's films remains limited, particularly concerning the transformation of these women's subjectivity. In Jia Zhangke's cinematography, characters are predominantly portrayed as marginalized, distanced from the mainstream societal echelons. Within this cohort, the inherent maternal instincts and femininity of marginalized women are depicted as possessing a redemptive quality for men and broader humanity. Crucially, this investigation into marginalized women not only elucidates the feminist themes present in Jia Zhangke's work but also, to a significant degree, fosters the self-awareness of marginalized women subjected to societal norms, advocating for the realization of women's legitimate aspirations. Such research carries profound practical significance and introduces innovative perspectives to the discourse.

### 3. Research Methods

This study will employ a qualitative method for textual analysis. Textual analysis is frequently recognized as a critical component of film critique within the realm of cinematography (Orifjonovich, 2023). Films are regarded as texts amenable to diverse interpretations and analyses (Brown & Collins, 2021). Essentially, textual analysis in the context of film involves a meticulous examination and interpretation of the myriad elements constituting a film, including its plot, characters, visual and auditory components, among other aspects integral to the film's composition (Spottiswoode, 2023). Through the process of textual analysis, researchers are afforded a comprehensive insight into the film's narrative and thematic essence.

This study selects three emblematic films directed by Jia Zhangke as the corpus for analysis, focusing on the portrayal of typical marginalized female characters within these films as the primary subjects of investigation. It specifically examines the characters' personality traits and background settings, alongside the delineation of the "Other" and the "Subject," as well as the catalysts for the characters' transformative journeys. Consequently, this study entails repeated viewings of a curated selection of films to scrutinize aspects such as scenes, movement of actors and other cinematic elements. Furthermore, it will conduct an in-depth analysis of marginalized female characters in Jia Zhangke's films, exploring the depiction and development of these characters throughout the narrative.

The three films selected for analysis in this paper are *Unknown Pleasure*, *Still Life*, and *Ash is Purest White*. The rationale behind choosing these specific films lies in their portrayal of the archetypal marginalized female figure identified as the Other, alongside the depiction of female characters who transition from the Other to assume the role of the Subject.

### 4. Discussion

The films examined within this paper are classified as dramas, with the selected works being *Unknown Pleasure* (2002), *Still Life* (2006), and *Ash is Purest White* (2018). Initially, the analysis focuses on the depiction of the 'Other' woman, specifically Zhao in *Unknown Pleasure* and Ma in *Still Life*. Subsequently, the paper explores the "Subject" female characters who transition from the 'Other' to a state of self-awareness as subjects: Shen in *Still Life* and QiaoQiao in *Ash is Purest White*. Lastly, it will identify and discuss the factors contributing to this transformative process.

#### 4.1. The "Other" Female Figure

This section delves into the concept of the "Other" as it aligns with the first dimension of the male gaze theory, which examines how men perceive women. According to [Chang \(2020\)](#), the depiction of women's roles on the cinema screen is not merely a product of imagination but is predominantly grounded in the actual portrayal of women. These cinematic representations often embody "angelic roles" characterized by voicelessness, benevolence, and a reclusive nature, rejoicing in their husbands' happiness. Stemming from an ingrained sense of sacrifice and constructed in alignment with the male gaze, these characters struggle to perceive their true selves. The focus here is on the portrayal of the 'Other' female character through the eyes of men—specifically, men who share an emotional connection with the women depicted in the film—highlighting how female characters are subjected to the male gaze.

In the early cinematographic oeuvre of Jia Zhangke, a conspicuous presence of female characters situated at society's margins is evident, with Zhao in *Unknown Pleasure* and Ma in *Still Life* standing out as quintessential examples. These characters epitomize the phenomenon of women in a male-centric societal paradigm, who, whether

*Unknown Pleasure* portrays Zhao as a dancer who loses her job due to an incestuous relationship with her instructor, subsequently resorting to a sexual arrangement with Qiao, a local gang leader, for financial sustenance. Zhao's existence, both physical and financial, falls under Qiao's dominion. As illustrated in [Figure 1](#), Qiao teaches Zhao to learn to smoke. As illustrated in [Figure 2](#), Qiao's insistence on Zhao getting a tattoo and adorning butterfly-patterned attire exemplifies the economic and physical disparities leading to a status imbalance. Zhao, as Qiao's consort, is perceived by him as young and attractive, with Qiao serving as her sole financial benefactor. This dependency does not foster equality but cements Zhao's status as the "Other."

Figure 1: Zhao's Smoking Behaviour



Source: [Jia \(2002\)](#)

The film delineates Qiao's proprietary stance over Zhao through her attire and the mandate for a tattoo, symbolizing male possessiveness and the imposition of male aesthetic preferences onto women. [Daminger \(2020\)](#) discusses the patriarchal

expectation for women to exhibit exclusivity and compliance without imposing similar constraints on men. Consequently, Qiao views Zhao as a possession, tolerating his infidelities while vehemently opposing her interactions with other men. His violent reaction to Zhao's association with Ji is not rooted in love but a desire to uphold male supremacy and assert complete control over her. For Zhao, Ji represents a potential escape from Qiao's clutches, yet, to Ji, Zhao is merely an ephemeral amusement, his pursuit driven by youthful impulsiveness rather than genuine affection. Through the perspectives of Qiao and Ji, Zhao is relegated to an object for satisfying personal desires rather than a partner deserving of love and respect.

Figure 2: Zhao's Clothes



Source: [Jia \(2002\)](#)

*Still Life* narrates the plight of Ma, the protagonist, who is treated akin to merchandise by her family, initially rescued by the police, only to be later sold by her brother to another man. The narrative culminates with Ma's rescue by her first husband, Han, with whom she recommences her life. Despite differences from Zhao's character—Ma's modest dress and absence of disreputable employment—her experiences of being bought and sold epitomize her as a dominated object within the patriarchal social framework, presenting yet another archetype of the "Other." The film's storyline underscores Ma's existence within a continuum of male redemption, asserting that her salvation is both possible and requisite through male intervention. Ma, purchased as a bride by Han, establishes the foundation of their relationship on inequality. After being rescued, Ma returns to her hometown with her daughter, while Han remains engaged in coal mining in Shanxi. It is only upon learning of a disaster in Ma's hometown that Han recollects his wife and daughter and resolves to find them. By then, Ma had been sold by her brother to another man. Upon Han's discovery of Ma, she is depicted leaning on her new husband, a posture indicative of dependency and reflective of 'othering' behavior, exemplifying gendered power disparities under the male gaze.

Ma's inquiry into Han's delayed return is met with silence, prompting questions about her significance to him. If she were important, why did it take years for him to search for her? And if not, why seek her out again? The film leaves these questions unanswered, yet insights can be inferred from their exchange:

Han: I was so good to you, and you ran away. You were out of the womb at the time, and

my mum wouldn't let you work, she couldn't support you.

Han believes Ma's predicament results from her own decisions—if she had not left with the police but stayed with him, she would not have faced her subsequent hardships. Yet, the film's context reveals that Ma was sold to Han, indicating their union was not a matter of mutual consent. This transaction underscores the disparity inherent in traditional gender dynamics, where women are viewed and treated as commodities by men and within patriarchal ideologies. Upon their reunion, although Ma is no longer legally bound to Han as his wife, she instinctively engages in acts of service—taking Han's clothes to clean and inquiring about his hunger. As illustrated in [Figure 3](#), these actions reveal that despite the changed circumstances, Han perceives himself as deserving of subservience, reflecting a conventional male perspective on women: that women's inherent role is to serve men. This dynamic highlights the enduring influence of traditional gender roles and the objectification of women within the narrative framework.

Figure 3: Ma helped Han to dry his clothes



Source: [Jia \(2006\)](#)

In a pivotal scene, as illustrated in [Figure 4](#), Ma is depicted crouching on the floor, while Han stands above her, leaning down to communicate. Ma's makeup is deliberately made to appear rough and outdated, underscoring her haggard appearance, which prompts Han's decision to repurchase her. This scene's staging vividly illustrates Ma's subordinate position, visually emphasizing her lower status and her need to look upwards towards the male figure. Han's position, requiring only to look down, starkly represents the gender imbalance and the stereotypical portrayal of women under the male gaze: women are depicted as unable to survive without men's intervention, necessitating male rescue. In Han's perspective, Ma is perceived as his property, a sufferer, and a vulnerable individual reliant on his support and rescue. Conversely, Ma actively assumes a role subordinate to the male, signaling her dependency and anticipation for his salvation.

Figure 4: Ma squatting, Han standing



Source: [Jia \(2006\)](#)

Zhao and Ma epitomize women with ambiguous self-awareness. Zhao seeks to escape one man's control by leveraging another, yet remains viewed merely as an object of desire by men. Ma, devoid of autonomy, passively awaits rescue, even after being commodified by her family. These characters illustrate a dual dynamic: on one hand, they position and perceive themselves through the lens of the male gaze; on the other, their actions betray a lack of fidelity to love, leading to men's disillusionment. To establish genuine subjective status, women must transcend the confines of the male gaze, attain accurate self-knowledge, and secure their voice.

Despite Jia Zhangke's endeavors to objectively document the image of marginalized women within the temporal context, the limitations imposed by the era and the male directorial perspective render the female characters in his films as subordinate to men to varying degrees. Ma and Zhao not only forfeit their sense of self-subjectivity but also view men as their liberators, embodying the quintessential "Other." Zhangke's cinematography aims for objectivity in depicting the survival struggles of Chinese women within a patriarchal framework. Through these female characters, the film mirrors the real-world predicaments faced by women. In a society dominated by male perspectives, women are often inadvertently marginalized, struggling to navigate their path to societal mainstream.

#### 4.2. The "Subject" Female Figure

This section delves into the portrayal of women who, despite facing similar male-dominated constraints as Ma and Zhao, exhibit burgeoning self-awareness in Jia Zhangke's films. These characters, unlike Ma and Zhao, resist succumbing to their circumstances or accepting subordination to men. Instead, they channel their long-repressed emotions and articulate a robust sense of self-consciousness. Shen in *Still Life* and Qiaoqiao in *Ash is Purest White* exemplify women who have, to varying extents, awakened their self-awareness. Zhangke's films thus mark a departure from the absence of women and female consciousness, portraying not only the objectified status of marginalized women in a patriarchal society but also their transition from the "Other" to the "Subject."

The concept of the "Subject" discussed herein not only encapsulates the emergence of the female subject but also aligns with the second dimension of the male gaze theory: how women view themselves. Within the purview of the male gaze, women often internalize and assess themselves based on male standards. However, women transitioning from "Other" to "Subject" endeavor to break free from this external valuation, choosing instead to act in alignment with their intrinsic self-worth.

*Still Life* narrates the quest of Shen to locate her husband, who has been absent for years, ultimately uncovering his infidelity. Distinct from other "Other" female characters, Shen opts for divorce, choosing to return home independently. As a nurse, Shen tracks down her husband, Guo, in Sichuan, who has not returned home for two years. As illustrated in [Figure 5](#), the film captures Shen's search through extended shots of a desolate factory, a disinterested leader, and the relics within the dormitory. Despite her efforts to locate her husband and her pleas for information from the leader, the truth remains elusive. She also ventures into her husband's room to collect his left-behind possessions. As illustrated in [Figure 6](#), during the search, Shen is consistently seen with a mineral water bottle, from which she drinks throughout her journey. This prop and action symbolize her inner turmoil and anxiety, suggesting that Shen still embodies the traditional "Other" woman, her emotional state influenced by male actions. Ultimately, Shen's confrontation with her husband reveals his betrayal. The meeting is depicted with Shen maintaining a composed demeanor, highlighting an equanimous exchange of gazes between the two.

Figure 5: Shen searches for her husband in an abandoned factory



Source: [Jia \(2006\)](#)

Within the conventional gender hierarchy, the expectation is often that women will wait for men, with men traditionally holding the dominant power within marital relationships. At this juncture, Shen has essentially undergone the transformation from the "Other" to the "Subject." She courageously challenges the male-centric marital order and asserts her agency within the relationship. Initially, the film portrays her husband as the proactive figure, seeking out his own path, while Shen appears to be in a passive stance, awaiting his calls and emotional sustenance. This male-centric culture disadvantages women, simultaneously diminishing and discriminating against them, perpetuating the notion that a woman's role is to await a man's love and, subsequently,

his abandonment. This cycle, seemingly inescapable, dictates their fate from life to death. However, Shen actively disrupts this pattern by initiating a divorce and seeking a new life for herself. Although the film concludes with an open ending, not explicitly detailing Shen's life post-divorce, her journey towards becoming a "Subject" is evident. This transformation signifies a pivotal shift in her pursuit of self-worth, suggesting that her next steps involve actively seeking and defining it for herself.

Figure 6: Shen holding a water bottle



Source: [Jia \(2006\)](#)

*Ash is Purest White* chronicles Qiaoqiao's evolution from the consort of a gangster to an autonomous entrepreneur. Initially, in both narratives, Shen and Qiaoqiao epitomize the "Other": Shen remains in her hometown, tending to her absent husband's family, while Qiaoqiao, as the gangster's subordinate, commodifies herself to secure the means for her survival. Nonetheless, by the film's conclusion, they have both transitioned from being perceived as objects to recognizing themselves as subjects, heralding the emergence of women's self-aware consciousness, irrespective of the nature of this transformation.

As illustrated in [Figure 7](#), in the film's outset, Qiaoqiao, referred to as the "sister-in-law" by the gangster's associates, embodies a figure of contentment as she is assisted with moving, willingly aligning herself with the male "Other" without a trace of self-awareness. This portrayal aligns with traditional male expectations of women, who are often envisioned as regarding men as the epicenter of their universe, conforming to their anticipations ([Williams, 2023](#)). Qiaoqiao, albeit unconsciously, positions the gangster at the core of her world, adhering to the societal role of "sister-in-law" and modulating her behavior to fit this identity, thus becoming an "object" acting under the "subject's" directives. At this point, Qiaoqiao is depicted as an objectified entity within the male gaze.

In a pivotal scene of *Ash is Purest White*, Qiaoqiao exhibits subservience by cuddling up to the gangster, biting his neck, and sharing his cigarette, actions meant to delineate her status. Yet, in her attempt to assert dominance over the gangster, Qiaoqiao inadvertently reveals her loss of self, embodying the "Other." Her aspiration for marriage, driven by the belief that it would offer lifelong protection, underscores a nuanced paradox: while marriage appears to provide a safe haven where power dynamics are well-defined, it fails to extricate women from being perceived as the secondary sex ([Ljaz & Butt, 2021](#)).

The gangster, serving as both the financial backbone and the focal point of Qiaoqiao's existence, positions her as an obedient, voiceless "Other."

Figure 7: Qiaoqiao snuggles up to the gangster



Source: Jia (2018)

Midway through the film, following her separation from the gangster, Qiaoqiao encounters a man on a train and decides to travel with him to Xinjiang, attempting to reconstruct her "Other" identity through association with a man. Yet, this endeavor ends in abandonment, dismantling her marital aspirations and prompting her to forsake her "Other" identity in pursuit of self-worth and autonomy. This journey of self-discovery highlights Qiaoqiao's burgeoning self-awareness as she steps away from being a mere reflection of male desires, moving beyond the internalization of male expectations. As illustrated in Figure 8, in the film's later segments, Qiaoqiao returns to the mahjong parlor, where her identity evolves from "sister-in-law" to "sister," symbolizing her attainment of both economic and psychological independence. This transition marks the completion of her self-identity reconstruction, positioning her as a woman who has navigated through emotional tribulations to achieve genuine independence.

Figure 8: Qiaoqiao becomes a mahjong parlour owner



Source: Jia (2018)

Qiaoqiao begins her journey in the film as an "Other," reliant on the male lead for support and protection. However, following various personal and professional adversities, she opts to return to her hometown, embarking on an independent path and choosing to remain unmarried. At this juncture, Qiaoqiao has effectively navigated the transition from the Other to the Subject, emancipating herself from the need for male assistance and protection. She emerges as a woman who asserts her presence and navigates a male-dominated society with her own capabilities and intellect. This evolution of Qiaoqiao mirrors the broader narrative arc observed in Jia Zhangke's filmography, representing a common thread in the transformation of female roles across his works. The shift from "Other" to "Subject" signifies a journey of developing self-awareness, marking a profound spiritual and psychological transformation among marginalized women amidst societal shifts (Kanai & Gill, 2020). Thus, the process of self-awareness evolving from non-existence to a potent force symbolizes the inner transformation of women in the context of social change, serving as a catalyst for the metamorphosis from the "Other" to the "Subject."

The transition from "Other" to "Subject" signifies the rise of women's self-awareness, encapsulating their self-recognition of their importance and capabilities within the objective world, grounded in their gender identity. Shen and Qiaoqiao, through discovering their societal roles, embody the emergence of female self-consciousness in Jia Zhangke's cinematic universe.

This metamorphosis is primarily attributed to shifts in social identity. In *Ash is Purest White*, Qiaoqiao's persona is redefined through the establishment of a new social identity, illustrating that the female subject's identity is dynamic and evolves across social and active spheres (Rosca, Agarwal, & Brem, 2020). Alterations in the social milieu, emotional encounters, and aspirations contribute to the individual female subject's identity construction. Furthermore, evolving social norms and values have the potential to challenge and reconfigure traditional gender dynamics, fostering the self's redefinition as a subject.

Moreover, the maintenance of emotional equilibrium plays a pivotal role in women's development of subjectivity within Jia Zhangke's films. Female subjectivity emerges through a gradual process within the dynamic interplay and emotional connections with others, where emotion acts as both the catalyst and impetus for this reformation. Women can transcend the "Other" status by detaching their emotional dependencies on men (Garcia, 2021). As discussed above, Shen in *Still Life* opts for divorce following her husband's infidelity, marking emotional betrayal as the catalyst for her self-realization and the primary motive behind her evolution from "Other" to "Subject."

## 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this paper has elucidated how Jia Zhangke's films delineate the continuum of female identity, eschewing the male-centric narrative that traditionally objectifies the female form, thereby portraying the existential plight and stark realities faced by marginalized women in contemporary China.

The analysis of the three selected films reveals that certain female characters achieve a transition from the "Other" to the "Subject," concurrently fostering a sense of female self-awareness. Despite this, it is crucial to acknowledge that Zhangke's films

predominantly adopt a male viewpoint, positioning female characters as ancillary to their male counterparts. Notably, the films introduce new female figures characterized by distinct personalities who are not constrained by traditional roles. While they do not overtly challenge the male-dominated societal structure, they strive to actualize their authentic selves within the confines of female agency. Ultimately, these female characters, having dismantled the traditional gender hierarchy of the Other, do not confront or challenge the male subject; instead, they assist other women in affirming their true status as subjects.

Cinema acts as a conduit for societal ideologies, prompting viewers to reflect on societal norms and human nature. Through a male lens, Jia Zhangke articulates his perspective on women's status within a patriarchal society and draws attention to the plight of women marginalized by social hierarchies, ensuring their presence is acknowledged in his cinematic works. Zhangke's films not only facilitate a symbolic exchange of women's emotional experiences but also concretize the conditions and existence of women through visual storytelling, fostering the reimagination and reevaluation of female subjectivity at the societal level. This cinematic endeavor unleashes the profound potential of visual media as an expressive tool for societal sentiments. The aspiration is for women to be recognized as true subjects within cinematic narratives, endowed with their distinct voices and rendered visible as autonomous "Subjects."

## Acknowledgement

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisors, for their support. I would like to thank the editorial team of MJSSH for their valuable suggestions.

## Funding

This study received no funding.

## Conflict of Interest

The authors reported no conflicts of interest for this work and declare that there is no potential conflict of interest with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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