

# Edge Echoes: The Tale of Two Cities and Transnational Resonance in the Films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Jia Zhangke

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## Abstract

This study focuses on Thai director Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Chinese director Jia Zhangke, core representatives of Sino-Thai art cinema with typical “tale of two cities” narrative frameworks, exploring transnational resonance in their spatial narratives and depictions of marginalized groups. Research methods, tools, populations and data providers, data analysis and synthesis: Adopting a “three-dimensional integration” method (textual analysis with quantitative/qualitative indicators, comparative study with a three-dimensional framework, cultural studies with contextualized analysis), the research uses film text analysis tools (shot duration statistics, audio-visual symbol coding), takes marginalized groups in Sino-Thai art films (Isan minorities, Burmese immigrants, Chinese migrant workers, etc.) as research populations, and relies on primary data (core films of the two directors) and secondary data (scholarly studies on Sino-Thai art cinema) from Yunnan Arts University’s film archives and academic databases. Data analysis is conducted through statistical coding of audio-visual elements and thematic categorization of marginal narratives, while data synthesis integrates textual, comparative and cultural analysis results to form a holistic conclusion.

The research decodes their “two cities” construction: Apichatpong’s “Isan/Bangkok” and “Khon Kaen/political space”; Jia’s “Fenyang/Beijing” and “World Park/migrant settlements”. It analyzes dilemmas of groups like Isan minorities, Burmese immigrants, Chinese migrant workers, and clarifies the interactive relationship between marginal groups and dual-city spaces (escape, oppression, return). The research finds that Apichatpong constructs a fluid spiritual “two cities” with a “transcendental style”, providing a soul sanctuary for marginalized groups through time crystals, psychological spaces, and natural soundscapes. In contrast, Jia Zhangke creates material “two cities” with an “documentary aesthetics”, amplifying the real cries of the underclass by relying on long shots, dialects, and pop music. Although rooted in the different cultural contexts (Thai Buddhist tradition with internal diversity vs. China’s social transformation with regional urbanization differences), the two directors form a profound transnational resonance in terms of “criticizing homogeneous modernization”, “preserving marginal memories”, and “practicing humanistic care”. This study fills the gap in the “tale of two cities” perspective in the comparative study of Chinese and Thai art films, and provides a theoretical reference for cross-cultural dialogue in regional cinema, while acknowledging the limitation of selective sampling and proposing to extend the analytical framework to more directors in future research.

**Keywords:** Apichatpong Weerasethaku, Jia Zhangke, Sino-Thai cinema, Marginal narrative, Cross-cultural, Transnational resonance, Marginalized groups, Tale of two cities

## Introduction

Since the 21st century, Thai and Chinese art cinema has achieved breakthrough development in the global film industry: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, with works such as *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* and *Memoria*, has broken the stereotypical

impression of Thai films as “typified and comedic”. By virtue of his personal style that integrates Buddhist transcendental thinking with post-modern audio-visual techniques, he has become a core representative of Southeast Asian cinema’s move towards the

international arena (Chen, 2023). For his part, Jia Zhangke, through works like the “Hometown Trilogy” (*Xiao Wu*, *Platform*, *Unknown Pleasures*), as well as *The World* and *Mountains May Depart*, has used documentary-style lenses to record the bottom-level survival during China’s social transformation period, establishing the iconic aesthetics of China’s Sixth Generation directors (Xu, 2017; Tian, 2017).

Recent studies on Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s films have explored the semiotic power, thematic depth, and experimental nature of his works. Surasak Boonarch (2024) analyzed five of Weerasethakul’s award-winning films, revealing recurring themes such as medicine, forests, politics, and memory. The study emphasizes that the director constructs multi-layered meanings through the use of symbols and cross-media references. Alvaro (2022) regards Apichatpong’s films as a rhizomatic national cinema, combining elements of nature, daily life, the supernatural, and the sacred in a rhizomatic manner, enabling people to deepen their understanding of national culture through contemplation and perception. Vicentin et al. (2020) examined the fluidity of boundaries and hybridity in Weerasethakul’s films, linking them to the philosophical ideas of Deleuze, Guattari, and Andrade. In his discussion of Apichatpong’s film *Memoria*, Zhang (2023) focused on the transferability of Apichatpong’s creative experience in cross-cultural creation. Li and Liu (2021) viewed diseases in Apichatpong’s films as metaphors for religious culture, political reality, and power spaces. Feng (2021) relied on Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia” to analyze the two spaces of hospitals and forests that often appear in Apichatpong’s films, and ultimately interpreted Apichatpong’s films as a form of “heterotopia”. Loska (2024) focused on Weerasethakul’s feature debut *Mysterious Object at Noon*, emphasizing the fusion of ethnography and surrealism in the film. This film is regarded as an epistemological experiment that integrates multiple voices and involves participants in the creative process. These studies collectively highlight Weerasethakul’s unique approach to filmmaking — an approach that combines artistic expression with research methodology and challenges traditional narrative structures.

As a representative figure among China’s Sixth Generation directors, Jia Zhangke has long been a subject of extensive research due to his significant

contributions to Chinese art cinema. His works, including the “Hometown Trilogy”, explore themes such as marginalization, urbanization, and social transformation in Chinese society (McGrath, 2005). Jia Zhangke’s creations often focus on the migrant worker group, reflecting the social changes in China’s transition from an era dominated by Mao Zedong Thought to market socialism (Bortzmeyer, 2018). Despite widespread international acclaim, Jia Zhangke’s films face distribution difficulties in mainland China due to censorship policies (Li, 2023). Film scholar Michael Berry once conducted detailed dialogues with Jia Zhangke, which recorded Jia’s filmmaking methods, creative influences, and his views on various fields of cinema (Berry, 2022). Research on Jia Zhangke’s films provides an important perspective for understanding the transnational development of Chinese art cinema, its production and distribution strategies, and the relationship between art cinema and national film policies (Li, 2023). In recent years, Chinese scholars’ studies on Jia Zhangke’s films have mostly proceeded from comparative research (Li, 2021) and auteur theory (Zhang, 2020; Dai, 2022), exploring his films’ emphasis on life experiences and attention to ordinary people, events, and things in the real world.

It is worth noting that as leading figures in the field of art cinema in China and Thailand, both occupy a pivotal position in their respective creative landscapes. With their unique artistic perspectives and profound humanistic care, they have injected vigorous vitality into the development of art cinema in both countries and even across Asia. What is particularly crucial is that both have chosen “dual-city” spaces as the core carrier of their narratives in their creative practices. Through meticulous depictions and ingenious connections of the two cities in terms of geographical environment, cultural atmosphere, and social texture, they have constructed rich and three-dimensional narrative frameworks. Meanwhile, they have always cast their affectionate gaze on marginalized groups neglected by mainstream society, capturing their living conditions, emotional entanglements, and spiritual dilemmas through the lens, endowing these groups with vivid life texture and profound human warmth.

However, a review of existing relevant research findings reveals that academic discussions on the creations of the two directors are often confined to case

studies of a single director or a single work. Even when comparative research is involved, it mostly remains at the level of superficial style comparisons or thematic listings, lacking a systematic and in-depth comparison of their “tale of two cities” narrative logic. For example, key issues such as the functional differences of the “two cities” in the narrative, the patterns of interactive relationships between the “two cities”, and the cultural metaphors implied behind the “two cities” imagery have not yet been comprehensively and deeply analyzed. Furthermore, existing studies have not even touched upon the transnational resonance mechanism inherent in their marginal narratives. Although the stories of these marginalized groups are rooted in the distinct social and cultural contexts of China and Thailand, they share cross-border echoes and connections in terms of universal human emotional experiences, survival dilemmas, and value pursuits. However, academic exploration into the internal causes, manifestations, and cultural significance of such resonance remains insufficient. Therefore, this research dimension that awaits improvement not only becomes the core focus of this paper but also provides an insightful research perspective for us to gain a deeper understanding of the creative texture of Chinese and Thai art films and the implications of their cross-cultural communication.

The selection of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Cultural comparative research is -Jia Zhangke for cross :based on three core rationales

1. Typicality of dual-city narrative: Both directors take the “dual-city” spatial contrast as the core narrative framework throughout their creative careers, forming a complete and systematic dual-city narrative system ( Apichatpong: Isan/ Bangkok, Khon Kaen/ political space, Colombia/ Thailand; Jia Zhangke: Fenyang/ Beijing, World Park/ migrant settlements, Fenyang/ Shanghai ), which is rare in Sino- Thai art cinema and has representative research value.

2. Complementarity of cultural contexts: Apichatpong’s creation is rooted in Thai Buddhist tradition (especially the integration of Isan animism and Theravada Buddhism), while Jia Zhangke’s works are embedded in China’s social transformation (urban-rural dual structure, regional differences in urbanization between inland and coastal areas). The contrast between the two cultural contexts can reveal the universal and specific characteristics of marginal narratives in Asian art cinema.

3. Research gap: Existing studies focus on single-director case studies or superficial style comparisons, lacking a systematic analysis of the “tale of two cities” narrative logic between the two, and failing to explore the transnational resonance mechanism of their marginal narratives.

This study selects core films of the two directors with explicit screening criteria to ensure the validity of the research sample.

**Table 1** Definition of research objects (core films)

Director	Selected films	Screening criteria
Apichatpong Weerasethakul	Blissfully Yours (2002), Tropical Malady (2004), Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives (2010), Cemetery of Splendour(2015), Memoria (2023)	1. Explicitly construct dual-city spatial contrast; 2. Cover different creative stages (early exploration, mature period, cross-cultural creation); 3. Focus on typical marginalized groups in Thailand (Isan minorities, Burmese immigrants, comatose soldiers).
Jia Zhangke	“Hometown Trilogy” (Xiao Wu 1997, Platform 2000, Unknown Pleasures 2002), The World (2004), Mountains May Depart (2015)	1. Take dual-city spatial conflict as the core narrative line; 2. Cover different stages of China’s social transformation (1990s urbanization, 2000s globalization, 2010s transnational mobility); 3. Depict typical marginalized groups in China (migrant workers, laid-off workers, small-town youth).

The core research questions of this study include:

1. How do Apichatpong and Jia Zhangke present the living dilemmas of marginalized groups through the construction of “dual-city” spaces?

2. Is there cross-cultural resonance in their marginal narratives based on different cultural contexts? If it exists, what are its core dimensions?

### Objective

1. Decode the construction logic of “dual-city” spaces in the two directors’ films, clarifying the role of audio-visual language differences (transcendental style vs. documentary aesthetics) in marginal narratives.

2. Analyze the representation of marginal subjects in “tale of two cities”, identifying common dilemmas of marginalized groups and their interactive relationships with dual-city spaces.

3. Explore the core dimensions of transnational resonance in their marginal narratives (criticizing modernization, preserving memory, humanistic care).

4. Clarify how cultural specificity (Thai Buddhism/ China’s social transformation) shapes differentiated marginal narrative paths.

### Method

This study adopts a “three-dimensional integration” research method to ensure the depth of analysis and the relevance to literature, with clear operational procedures, tools, research populations, data providers, and data analysis/synthesis methods.

#### Textual analysis method

Centering on the triad of “audio-visual language – narrative structure – symbolic metaphor” within film texts, this study employs a mixed-methods analytical approach incorporating both quantitative and qualitative indicators. Utilizing tools such as shot duration measurement software, audio-visual symbol coding schemes, and narrative structure analysis frameworks, the research investigates the distinctive cinematic styles of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Jia Zhangke. For Apichatpong, the analysis focuses on how signature techniques—such as “static long takes” (accounting for 60%-90%, Chen, 2023), “time crystals” that interweave past, present, and future temporalities, and “natural soundscapes” (e.g., jungle insect sounds, radio static)—

collectively construct transcendent dual cities, evoking the spiritual and affective flows of marginalized subjectivities. Statistical coding is applied to measure the duration and distribution of static long takes across different scene types, while thematic coding is used to interpret the symbolic and atmospheric functions of natural sound elements. In the case of Jia Zhangke, the study emphasizes how “documentary-style long takes,” “underclass narratives,” and the strategic use of “pop music” (such as the song *Whether in Platform*) collaboratively portray realistic dualities in China’s social landscape. These elements are examined through a conjunctive analysis that integrates formal techniques with socio-historical context, revealing how Jia’s cinematic language captures the lived realities and emotional textures of marginalized communities within a rapidly transforming society.

The research focuses on marginalized groups portrayed in the core film oeuvres of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Jia Zhangke, serving as the primary research populations. These include the Isan ethnic minorities, Burmese immigrants, and comatose soldiers in Apichatpong’s works, as well as migrant workers, laid-off workers, and small-town youth featured in Jia Zhangke’s films. Data for the study is drawn from two main sources: primary data consisting of film texts obtained from the film archive at Yunnan Art University, which provide the foundational audio-visual materials for analysis; and secondary data sourced from academic databases such as CNKI and JSTOR, including scholarly research on audio-visual language analysis to support theoretical interpretation and contextual understanding. Together, these data sources enable a comprehensive exploration of how cinematic narratives represent social marginalization and articulate the lived experiences of disadvantaged communities.

Data Analysis and Synthesis involves two key processes: Data Analysis and Data Synthesis. Data Analysis includes both quantitative analysis of audio-visual elements, such as the proportion of long shot durations and the frequency of dialect usage, as well as qualitative thematic analysis of symbolic metaphors, for example, interpreting the jungle as a spiritual sanctuary or demolition walls as memory symbols. Data Synthesis entails integrating the quantitative and qualitative results

to form a comprehensive interpretation of how textual elements contribute to the construction of dual-city spaces and marginal narratives. This integrated approach allows for a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between textual elements and the spatial and narrative structures they create.

### Comparative research method

A three-dimensional comparative framework focusing on dual-city functions, marginalized subjects and narrative tone is applied in this study, which uses comparative indicator tables and cross-cultural contrast matrices for a systematic analysis of cinematic depictions of relevant themes.

This structured approach enables a nuanced examination of how spatial, social, and stylistic elements intersect in the works of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Jia Zhangke, facilitating cross-cultural insights into the portrayal of marginalized communities and urban duality.

In analyzing dual-city functions, the framework compares Apichatpong's "spiritually redemptive dual cities", where spaces like the jungle in *Syndromes and a Century* as sanctuaries for immigrants, with Jia Zhangke's "materially struggling dual cities," exemplified by the contrast between the World Park and migrant workers' basements in *The World*. This comparison is grounded in the indicator of "the role of space in marginal groups' survival state." Regarding marginal subjects, the study distinguishes Apichatpong's "transcendentalized marginals," such as comatose soldiers in *Cemetery of Splendour*, from Jia Zhangke's "actualized marginals," like the thief in *Xiao Wu*, using the indicator of "presentation mode of marginal predicaments (spiritual vs. material)" to highlight divergent representational strategies.

The narrative tone is examined through a contrastive lens, focusing on how Apichatpong's meditative, non-linear storytelling, embodied in techniques like "fixed long shots" and "time crystals", evokes the spiritual flow of marginalized groups, versus Jia Zhangke's realist, documentary-inspired tone that captures the material struggles of underclass communities. By integrating these dimensions through the comparative framework, the analysis synthesizes quantitative data (e.g., shot duration statistics) and qualitative insights (e.g., thematic coding of symbolic

metaphors) to construct a holistic interpretation of how film texts articulate dual-city spaces and marginal narratives across cultural contexts.

### Cultural studies method

Film texts are embedded within the cultural and social contexts of China and Thailand, utilizing contextual analysis frameworks and cultural theory coding tools, such as Buddhist reincarnation theory and the urban-rural dual structure theory. For Apichatpong's works, the research combines Thailand's "marginalization of the Isan region" and the "Buddhist concept of cause and effect" to interpret the cultural roots of "the transcendental nature of the jungle" in his dual-city narrative, with a focus on the integration of Isan animism and mainstream Thai Buddhism. For Jia Zhangke's films, it connects China's "1990s urbanization" and "urban-rural dual structure" to analyze the social drivers behind "the identity alienation of migrant workers" in his dual-city narrative, emphasizing the regional differences in urbanization between inland (Fenyang) and coastal (Shanghai) areas. Meanwhile, drawing on documents from the "auteur theory perspective," the research highlights the two directors' personalized expression of cultural contexts as distinctive "auteurs".

The research populations center on the cultural context elements reflected in the core films, including Buddhist symbols and urbanization signs. The data sources consist of primary data (i.e., the film texts themselves) and secondary data, such as studies on Thai Buddhist culture and research on China's urbanization, retrieved from cultural studies databases and government statistical yearbooks.

In the data analysis phase, thematic coding is applied to the cultural symbols in the film texts, with these symbols linked to relevant socio-cultural background factors. For data synthesis, the results of textual and contextual analyses are integrated to clarify the cultural specificity inherent in the dual-city narratives of both directors.

### Findings

#### Construction logic of dual-city spaces

#### *Apichatpong's "realistic/transcendental" dual cities*

In the films, different spatial pairs carry distinct

symbolic meanings: For Isan/Bangkok, Bangkok—characterized by dim clinics and crowded factories—constructs an oppressive disciplinary field, while the Isan jungle, presented through fixed long shots and natural soundscapes, forms a transcendental redemptive space with “temporal autonomy,” offering spiritual sanctuary for immigrants. For Khon Kaen/Political Space, Khon Kaen, with its air-raid shelters and orchid fields as memory carriers, confronts the political space (a hospital converted from a school) marked by power-induced forgetting, reflecting the conflict between personal memory and political trauma. For Colombia/Thailand, the “mysterious loud bang” in Memoria connects the Colombian jungle and Thailand’s Isan region, forging a transnational resonance field of marginal memories, where the “ascending boulder” symbolizes the transcendence of national boundaries by these marginal memories.

#### *Jia Zhangke’s “Traditional/modern” dual cities*

In Jia Zhangke’s works, distinct spatial pairs embody profound thematic connotations: For Fenyang/Beijing, Fenyang—characterized by dilapidated streets and demolition walls—serves as a “folded memory time capsule,” confronting Beijing, a “desire mirage” marked by the symbolic infiltration of consumerism, which reflects the displacement and disillusionment of small-town youth. For World Park/Migrant Workers’ Settlements, the virtuality of World Park (represented by miniature global landscapes) simplifies modernity through capital, while the harsh reality of migrant workers’ basement dwellings (with bunk beds and damp walls) highlights the survival oppression faced by the underclass, forming a stark contrast between virtuality and reality. For Fenyang/Shanghai, Fenyang in 1999—featuring warm yellow tones and a 4:3 aspect ratio—acts as a carrier of collective memory, confronting Shanghai in 2025 (presented with cool white tones and a 2.35:1 widescreen format) as a “space of forgetting,” reflecting the dissipation of memory amid the process of modernization.

#### **Representation of marginal subjects in “Tale of Two Cities”**

##### *Common dilemmas of marginalized groups*

Two core themes permeate these narratives: identity anxiety and survival alienation. Regarding identity anxiety, Burmese immigrants in Bangkok are denied legal status; Chinese migrant workers in Beijing are labeled “Beipiao” and stripped of local identity; comatose soldiers in Khon Kaen lose their sense of self due to war trauma; and small-town youth in Fenyang become disillusioned with urban identity. As for survival alienation, Isan ethnic minorities face double oppression in Bangkok—discrimination from both mainstream society and other ethnic groups; laid-off workers in Fenyang grapple with poverty and unemployment; and migrant workers at World Park can only access false modernity by “playing the other.”

##### *Interactive relationship with dual-city spaces*

Three intertwined motifs—escape, oppression, and return—permeate the narratives: For escape, Min flees Bangkok for the Isan jungle, casting off the “immigrant” label; in Platform, Cui Mingliang chases a train to break free from Fenyang, yet the “unfinished” train embodies the impossibility of genuine escape. For oppression, Bangkok’s clinics and factories oppress immigrants; Beijing’s consumerist culture burdens small-town youth; the capitalist logic of World Park alienates migrant workers; and Khon Kaen’s political space confines comatose soldiers. For return, Min journeys back to the Isan jungle and reclaims her subjectivity; in Mountains May Depart, Shen Tao returns to Fenyang and upholds collective memory; while in Still Life, Han Sanming heads back to the Three Gorges and preserves survival wisdom.

##### **Core dimensions of transnational resonance**

##### *Critique of homogeneous modernization*

For Apichatpong, Bangkok acts as a “cultural eraser” that suppresses the animistic beliefs of Isan—where U.S. military medical equipment displaces shamanic rituals—while the jungle resists homogenization by safeguarding Isan’s cultural heritage. For Jia Zhangke, Beijing instrumentalizes migrant workers through labor division, as exemplified by how World Park miniaturizes global landscapes to trivialize modernity; in contrast, Fenyang resists the

erosion of standardization by fusing local traditions with Western pop culture.

#### ***Preservation of marginal memories***

For Apichatpong, the air raid shelters and orchid fields of Khon Kaen serve as memory anchors, preserving the trauma of war, while shamanic rituals sustain the vitality of collective memory. For Jia Zhangke, the pop music and videotapes of Fenyang act as memory carriers, transforming individual recollections into collective archives—with intergenerational transmission forging a closed loop that resists forgetting.

#### ***Humanistic care for vulnerable groups***

For Apichatpong, he employs non judgmental static shots to present immigrants' skin conditions, dispelling the "aesthetics of suffering"; while shamans intuit soldiers' dreams through physical empathy, reconstructing the subjectivity of marginalized groups. For Jia Zhangke, he utilizes close-ups of handcuffs to lay bare the fragility of individual dignity amid institutional discipline, and captures migrant workers' labor conditions through long takes—thereby highlighting their overlooked humanity.

#### **Cultural specificity shaping marginal narrative paths**

##### ***Apichatpong: Thai Buddhist transcendental thinking (Integrated with Isan animism)***

Thai Buddhist "karma" and "reincarnation" concepts, combined with Isan animism, shape the transcendental dual-city narrative: marginal groups' predicaments are resolved through spiritual transcendence (jungle as reincarnation space, time crystals as interweaving of past/present/future), rather than real-world resistance, consistent with Thailand's cultural tradition of "reconciling suffering through faith".

##### ***Jia Zhangke: China's social transformation (Regional urbanization differences)***

1990s urban China's rural dual structure and regional differences in urbanization (inland Fenyang vs. coastal Shanghai) shape the documentary-style dual-city narrative: marginal groups' struggles are presented through realistic material survival states (long shots of

migrant workers' basements, dialect records of small-town life), reflecting China's cultural tradition of "emphasizing real-world problem-solving".

#### **Discussion**

##### **Discussion on dual-city space construction logic**

Apichatpong's "realistic/transcendental" dual cities rely on "time crystals" and natural soundscapes to break the linear time and physical boundaries of space, constructing a fluid spiritual space that provides spiritual redemption for marginalized groups. This spatial construction is closely related to the cyclical view of time in Thai Buddhism and the reverence for nature in Isan animism, where the jungle is not only a geographical space but also a spiritual homeland connecting past and future lives.

Jia Zhangke's "traditional/modern" dual cities rely on documentary long shots and dialects to restore the physical reality of space, constructing a solid material space that amplifies the survival pressure of marginalized groups. This spatial construction is rooted in China's urban-rural dual structure and the linear view of progress in modernization, where the contrast between small towns and metropolises reflects the irreversible impact of urbanization on rural society. The regional differences between inland and coastal urbanization further enrich the connotation of dual-city spaces, with Fenyang representing the slow-paced traditional society and Shanghai representing the fast-paced modern society.

##### **Discussion on marginal subject representation**

The common dilemmas of identity anxiety and survival alienation faced by marginalized groups in the two directors' works reflect the universal cost of modernization borne by vulnerable groups in developing countries. However, the presentation modes of these dilemmas are shaped by cultural contexts: Apichatpong presents marginal predicaments from a spiritual and metaphysical perspective (transcendentalized marginals), while Jia Zhangke presents them from a realistic and material perspective (actualized marginals).

The interactive relationship between marginal groups and dual-city spaces (escape-oppression-return) forms a cyclical narrative pattern, reflecting the helplessness of marginalized groups in the process of

modernization. Apichatpong's "return" to the jungle is a spiritual return to cultural roots, while Jia Zhangke's "return" to small towns is a physical return to collective memory, both of which are resistance strategies of marginal groups to modernization alienation.

### **Discussion on transnational resonance dimensions**

The three core dimensions of transnational resonance (critiquing modernization, preserving memory, humanistic care) reveal the universal value pursuit of Sino-Thai art cinema: both directors resist the homogenization of global modernization by preserving local culture, protect the dignity of marginalized groups by recording forgotten memories, and reconstruct the subjectivity of vulnerable groups through a de-spectacularized gaze.

This transnational resonance proves that marginal narratives rooted in local culture are more likely to arouse universal emotional resonance. Apichatpong's Buddhist symbols and Isan cultural elements, as well as Jia Zhangke's Shanxi regional culture and Chinese urbanization signs, are the foundation of this resonance — only by deeply rooting in local cultural contexts can marginal narratives break through national boundaries and become a common language of humanistic care.

### **Discussion on cultural specificity and narrative paths**

Apichatpong's Buddhist transcendental thinking (integrated with Isan animism) Determines his "spiritual redemption" narrative path: marginal groups achieve liberation through transcendence of space and time, rather than changing real-world power structures. This is consistent with the cultural characteristics of Thailand, where Buddhism plays a core role in reconciling social contradictions and individual suffering.

Jia Zhangke's focus on China's social transformation (regional urbanization differences) determines his "realistic voice" narrative path: marginal groups' struggles are presented as concrete material survival problems, calling for attention to the real costs of urbanization. This is consistent with the cultural characteristics of China, where social reality and practical problems are the core concerns of art creation.

### **Methodological limitations and future research directions**

This study selects only two internationally prominent art film directors from China and Thailand, which may present a monolithic perspective of "Thai" or "Chinese" cinema. Although this selective approach is methodologically justified for establishing a core argument, future research should extend the analytical framework to more directors (e.g., Thai director Anocha Suwichakornpong, Chinese director Wang Xiaoshuai) to mitigate selection bias and enhance the applicability of the framework.

This study's analysis of "Thai Buddhism" and "China's social transformation" has a tendency of over-generalization: Thai Buddhism includes diverse forms such as Isan animism-integrated Buddhism and Bangkok mainstream Buddhism; China's social transformation has obvious regional differences (e.g., inland industrial cities vs. coastal commercial cities). Future research should conduct more nuanced cultural analysis, combining micro-level regional culture with macro-level national context.

This study adopts an exclusive textual and contextual analytical approach, and the "transnational resonance" is a postulated assertion rather than an empirically substantiated phenomenon. Future research should conduct empirical studies on audience reception (e.g., questionnaires and in-depth interviews with Chinese, Thai, and international audiences) to verify how these marginal narratives are received by diverse audiences and the impact of cultural contexts on reception effects.

### **Suggestion**

Based on the research findings and methodological limitations, this paper puts forward suggestions from three dimensions: "interdisciplinary research", "film creation", and "cross-cultural communication":

#### **Interdisciplinary research dimension**

Advance interdisciplinary research on "bodily fluidity" and "identity fluidity": Integrate the "cinematic bodily fluidity" in Apichatpong's works with Jia Zhangke's "identity narratives" to conduct in-depth analysis of the link between marginalized groups' bodily representations (e.g., animalized bodies,

exhausted bodies) and identity anxiety, adopting empirical approaches such as audience perception experiments. Deepen nuanced investigations into cultural contexts by conducting comparative studies on regional variations in Thai Buddhist practices and China's urbanization, eschewing overgeneralization of national cultural contexts. Undertake empirical research on audience reception to examine variations in how audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds engage with marginal narratives, utilizing quantitative (questionnaires) and qualitative (interviews) methods to validate transnational resonance effects. Expand the analytical framework to encompass more Sino-Thai art film directors, diversifying the research sample to form a more comprehensive understanding of marginal narratives in Sino-Thai cinema.

#### **Film creation dimension**

Leverage the spatial metaphor of “dual-city contrast”: Chinese and Thai creators can adopt “small-scale spatial contrasts” (e.g., family/society, private memory/public history) to depict marginal themes, integrating Apichatpong's transcendental spatial construction with Jia Zhangke's realistic spatial representation to prevent the flattening of marginal narratives. Strike a better balance between “cultural specificity” and “universality”: Anchor marginal narratives in local cultural contexts (e.g., Isan animism, Shanxi regional culture) while distilling universal humanistic themes, without compromising local identities for the sake of globalization. Refine film selection criteria and analytical protocols: In creative research, clearly articulate the rationale for selecting core works and the analytical metrics for narrative elements to ensure research rigor.

#### **Cross-cultural communication dimension**

Facilitate screenings of marginal themed films between China and Thailand: Establish a “Sino-Thai Marginal Cinema Section” at film festivals (e.g., Shanghai International Film Festival, Bangkok International Film Festival) to showcase works by both established and emerging creators from the two countries, fostering cross-cultural dialogue around marginal narratives. Develop a collaborative mechanism for marginal narratives in Sino-Thai cinema: Encourage co-productions focusing on transnational marginal

themes (e.g., Southeast Asian migrants, China-ASEAN laborers), employing the “dual-city narrative” framework to depict regionally shared predicaments and bolster the international impact of Sino-Thai cinema.

#### **Conclusion**

From the core perspective of the “dual-city narrative”, this study analyzes the construction logic and transnational resonance of marginal narratives in the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul and Jia Zhangke, with clear research object definition, detailed research methods, and refined cultural context analysis. The research shows that:

1. Apichatpong constructs a “reality/spirit” dual-city with a “transcendental style”, providing spiritual redemption spaces for Thailand's marginalized groups (ethnic minorities, migrants, soldiers), whose cultural roots lie in Thai Buddhist tradition integrated with Isan animism and the marginalized context of Isan.
2. Jia Zhangke creates a “tradition/modernity” dual-city with a “documentary aesthetic”, recording the real-life struggles of China's underclass groups (migrant workers, laid-off workers, small-town youth), whose social driving force is China's urbanization (regional differences) and the urban-rural dual structure.
3. Despite differentiated narrative paths shaped by cultural contexts, the two directors achieve profound transnational resonance in criticizing modernization alienation, preserving marginal memories, and practicing humanistic care, reflecting the universal cost of modernization borne by vulnerable groups in developing countries.

The academic value of this study is mainly reflected in two aspects: On the one hand, it fills the gap in the “dual-city narrative” perspective in the comparative study of Chinese and Thai art cinema, promoting the extension of single-director case studies to cross-cultural dialogue; On the other hand, it provides a reference framework for regional film research, confirming that marginal narratives rooted in local culture are more likely to cross national borders and arouse universal resonance. This study also acknowledges methodological limitations: the selective sampling of only two core directors may lead to a monolithic perspective, the cultural context analysis has a tendency of over-generalization, and the audience reception analysis is insufficient. Future research can

extend the analytical framework to more directors, conduct nuanced cultural analysis, and verify transnational resonance through empirical audience research, providing more exploration space for the deepening of Sino-Thai film research.

#### Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

In compliance with the guidelines for the use of generative AI in scientific writing, the authors hereby declare that no generative AI tools have been utilized at any stage of the preparation of this manuscript, including (but not limited to) improving the readability, refining the language, or drafting any part of the content.

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#### CRedit author statement

**Zhao Ziwen:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Software, Data curation, Writing- Original draft preparation, Visualization, Investigation, Supervision, Validation, Writing- Reviewing and Editing.

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