



Navigating and feeling place in *24 city* and *The World*

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ABSTRACT

The article explores how the representations of place offered in Jia Zhangke's seminal films *The World* (2004) and *24 City* (2006) contribute to Jia's overarching politicized commentary on how the fragile, albeit pervasive, underpinnings of contemporary neoliberal discourse rely upon romanticized notions of belonging and attachment within the context of contemporary urban China. Through a rigorous exploration of each text's depiction of urban sites, distinct localities and the corporeal, an examination of how bodies attempt and fail to feel belonging, connection and attachment is provided to consider what it means to experience and feel place and its lack. By marshaling theoretical approaches on place offered within critical geography, an analysis on the seemingly idiosyncratic sensation of intimacy, a critical component of experiencing place, is revealed to be a subjective and affectual experience that is framed by socioeconomic and cultural conditions. With these considerations in mind, an analysis on what it means to experience place within a context of socioeconomic exploitation and rapid cultural transformation -conditions that characterize Jia's representation of contemporary China-is offered.

1. Introduction

As their titles suggest, Jia Zhangke's seminal films *The World* (2004) and *24 City* (2008) are aesthetically and thematically preoccupied with the expression of place. In both films, the preoccupation with place is expressed through the depiction of material spaces that are integral to each film's narrative. These spaces include the city, the work-unit and the body. Beyond the mere depiction of material and identifiable spaces, place functions as a conceptual tool that illuminates an underlying and subversive cynicism and adds considerable emotional texture to each film. The possibilities that come from experiencing the feelings of belonging, intimacy and security that are associated with "place" are rendered paramount to how Jia's characters seek to understand their relationship to their urban environments, their work spaces and their sense of self as well as the other bodies with whom they attempt to form connections with. Yet, these discourses surrounding place are ultimately revealed as a form of ideological manipulation. The meanings and implications of place are markedly important insofar as Jia's characters are chiefly driven by fantasies about what their 'potential situ' could be within these varied spaces; however as each film relays, these "places" and the associated feelings of belonging, intimacy and security never materialize. The thematic emphasis on notions of place are integral to many of Jia's films. The decision to analyze *24 City* and *The World*, instead of one of Jia's many other films, is due to their respective portrayals of Chengdu and Beijing. Within Jia's oeuvre,

Fenyang, his hometown, and other small scale provincial towns are depicted regularly, however the depictions of large urban spaces is less common. Understanding the representation of major urban cities such as Beijing and Chengdu will allow the article to unearth and wrestle with the distinctions between space and place and the conceptual, political and narrative functions of place in Jia's work.

In order to engage in such an exercise, Yi-fu Tuan's (1977) approach to place in *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* will be deployed, as Tuan offers a thoughtful and generative intervention into the wider conversation surrounding place and its meanings. Tuan (1977) delineates that place is defined by how bodies come to make meaning out of, form attachments to and navigate within spatial environments. It is through these processes of experience wherein *space* transforms into *place*. The particular transformative and critical value of place derives from the understanding that spatial environments are informed by "spatial feelings and ideas in the stream of experience" (Tuan et al., 1979, p.388). By foregrounding the role of *experience* and *affect*, Tuan (1977) inadvertently calls into question the rigidity of the perceived distinction between temporality and spatiality. This is not to suggest that temporality and spatiality become interchangeable concepts; temporality and spatiality clearly exist as concepts in their own right (Tuan, 1977). Rather, Tuan's (1977) discussion of *place* merely recognizes that a fundamental intermingling of time and space inform the meaning of place, as place is understood as an immersive experience informed by intangible ideas and feelings that experience offers.

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Drawing on an approach to place that takes into account questions of affect and embodiment is generative to understanding how *24 City* and *The World's* representation of place is both a commentary on and a documentation of the alienation of navigating contemporary China, a claim that will be fleshed out in this article. Additionally, beyond the conceptual questions and political commentaries that both films offer, the article also aims to understand the specificity and role of cinema and its capacity to go beyond mere documentation, to impart an emotional texture when representing the contemporary political moment. In doing so, critical human geography and film theory, which tackles questions of affect, will be put in conversation and their points of contact will be explored.

2. Situating *The World* and *24 city*

The World and *24 City* share evident points of contact. Both films rely heavily on the poetic symbolism and aesthetic richness of the distinct spaces their characters occupy. *The World* relays the somewhat mundane albeit striking existence of a group of migrant workers, most of whom are performers or security guards, at Beijing World Park, a real amusement park located on the outskirts of Beijing. The park provides visitors the chance to tour miniature simulations of renowned international monuments such as the Eiffel Tower and the Great Pyramids of Giza. At Beijing World park, performers toil away preparing dances and showcases that incorporate various cultural elements to entertain visitors and park managers; the performers literally labor to aestheticize the notion of globalization. By contrast, the security guards protect the inauthentic recreations of renowned world sites. As imitations any grandeur or connotation of history, wealth and value is ultimately rendered a sardonic, if not melancholic, gesture. Although *The World* portrays the friendships and relationships of multiple characters, the primary storyline focuses heavily on the romantic relationship between Tao, a performer, and Taisheng, a security guard, which culminates in eventual destruction.

24 City, similarly, utilizes the factory space to offer an acerbic, albeit surreal, commentary on the consequences and casualties of rapid economic development made possible by an increasingly undervalued laboring class. The film captures the impending transition of the factory into a high-end luxury housing complex. The final days leading up to the factory's complete closure are depicted by intertwining documentary, fiction and experimental filmmaking techniques seamlessly, resulting in an abstract hybridized aesthetic wherein testimonial and brief vignettes of factory workers are placed alongside monologues and performances from recognizable professional actors portraying fictional factory workers. In effect, the factory encapsulates the real and manufactured memories and personal histories of 9 factory workers, some of whom are actual workers and some of whom are actors portraying workers. In addition to the human element of this space, the factory also serves as an abridged depiction of China's socio-economic evolution. When the factory first opened in the 1950s, it was operated by the government and manufactured aviation parts for the Chinese military. In the 1980s - a period noted for government propagated modernization initiatives - the previously state-owned factory was taken over by a private enterprise and began manufacturing household appliances. In effect, the history of the factory reflects the transition of Chinese labor from a "socialist" to the contemporary neoliberal context.

3. Living in distant urban places

The surrealism of the factory-turned apartment complex and Beijing World Park, is reinforced by representing Chengdu and Beijing as elusive and distant urban environments. The protagonists of *The World* and *24 City* exist in Beijing and Chengdu respectively, yet they are never able to situate themselves within either city in a manner that is wholly recognizable. The effect and purpose of conveying these urban environments as distant and removed from the protagonists' narratives is

integral to how Jia's characters relate to physical environments and to the overarching political commentary of each film (Cheung, 2010). The portrayal of detachment from the urban environments of Beijing and Chengdu is offered in various ways. For instance, it is notable that Beijing, and its environs, is in actuality dominated by easily identifiable symbols - The Great Wall, The Forbidden City and The Summer Palace. However, the only recognizable visual symbol of Beijing acknowledged in *The World* is a very brief depiction of Tiananmen Square, which given its glaring historical, political and symbolic significance is notable. The decision to utilize Beijing World Park and to foreground Beijing - China's leading political and cultural capital - while rarely providing visuals of a recognizable Beijing, highlights an element of contradiction. This approach to urban space is also offered in *24 City*. While depictions of Beijing are sparse, there are practically no portrayals of Chengdu in *24 City*, besides brief long shots that capture murky haze and distant high rises. The decision to depict Beijing and Chengdu, in this manner, is significant given that both cities are, in actuality, sprawling physical environments that are economically developing, demographically dynamic and geographically distinct.

Instead, it is the memories and longings that the protagonists provide in *24 City* and *The World* that imbue Chengdu and Beijing with meaning. In each film, characters relay preconceptions and fantasies they had about these cities as elusive yet promising spaces where opportunities and possibilities of achieving upward socioeconomic mobility and comfortable stability are on offer. However, despite the prevalence of this discourse on opportunities of upward mobility in contemporary urban China, each text also provides an explicit and cynical depiction of its fictitiousness. For instance, *The World* offers a notable scene wherein Tao and her romantic interest Taisheng lie on a bed recounting their experiences upon coming to Beijing. They share memories of the harsh reality they faced upon arrival as well as their dreams for the future. In a short vignette in *24 City*, an older female factory worker from 420 Factory relays leaving her child in order to secure an income in Chengdu that she could remit home. She describes having been able to provide generously for her family in the past but relays that her current income is inadequate and that she cannot sustain herself independently. Both of these sequences reveal that as urban environments, Beijing and Chengdu have initially attracted Jia's characters by the allure of security and stability being achievable.

As discussed, an aura of elusiveness is reinforced through Jia's refusal to portray these cities as concrete and static spatialized constructions. The illusion is intensified through Beijing and Chengdu being situated within ambiguous temporal frameworks (Hemelryk Donald, 2014; Shu-chin 2011; Cheung, 2010). To delve into the significance of the urban as a concept that resists positioning itself as a fixed temporal and spatial construction, Tuan's (1977) notion of place bears further integration. Tuan (1977) identifies three separate frameworks that inform the relationship between time and place: "(1) time as motion or flow and place as a pause in the temporal current; (2) attachment to place as a function of time, captured in the phrase 'It takes time to know a place'; and (3) place as time made visible, or place as memorial to times past" (p.179). In these frameworks, Tuan (1977) highlights that place can exist as a potential longing. For instance, when one imagines a promotion or a potential goal they hope to reach, they are inadvertently situating themselves in a "place" that exists within a temporal context (Tuan, 1977).

The notion of the city as a longing suggests that "place" is not merely an immediate experiential phenomenon, but that it can operate as a conceptualization of a rhapsodized past or as a visionary future. Such a conceptual understanding of place is especially pertinent given Chengdu and Beijing's respective situ in an ambiguous temporal framework - wherein each is framed as a recent memory and/or a future longing. Such depictions accentuate both cities as chimerical sites of security wherein stability and the opportunity of upward mobility are possible. Desired, but unmaterialized, feelings of belonging and security in contemporary China are projected onto these socioeconomic and

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