

# Linguistic Landscapes in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*

Juuso Virtanen

Bachelor's thesis

Chinese Language, Bachelor of Arts

School of Languages and Translation Studies

Faculty of Humanities

University of Turku

May 2025

The originality of this thesis has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

Bachelor's Thesis

**Chinese Language, Bachelor of Arts**

**Juuso Virtanen**

**Linguistic Landscapes in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life***

**Number of pages:** 31 pages, 1 appendix

This thesis examines the use of linguistic landscapes in Jia Zhangke's *Still Life*. It investigates how text is used in the film and if and how these linguistic landscapes connect to Jia Zhangke's general themes.

Data was gathered by pausing the film whenever any text appeared on-screen and marking down the text with a timestamp. The data was sorted and analysed using frameworks derived from both linguistic landscape studies and film theory. The analysis was primarily qualitative. The results establish a clear intent to guide the viewer's focus towards text in the film and demonstrate a sophisticated and layered use of linguistic landscapes. This study argues that the linguistic landscapes in *Still Life* are connected to the main thematic elements of Jia Zhangke's films. In the future, the methodology used here could possibly be applied to analyse the linguistic landscapes of other films as well.

**Key words:** linguistic landscapes, Jia Zhangke, *Still Life*, Chinese, cinema, film

## **Table of contents**

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Literary review</b>	<b>8</b>
2.1	Linguistic landscape studies	8
2.2	Mise-en-scene and juxtaposition	10
2.3	Jia Zhangke	11
<b>3</b>	<b>Background: The Three Gorges Dam</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>4</b>	<b>Methodology</b>	<b>15</b>
4.1	Establishing intent through film theory and technique	15
4.2	Data collection	17
4.3	Limitations	18
<b>5</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>19</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Analysis</b>	<b>25</b>
6.1	Figures 1-2	25
6.2	Figure 3	26
6.3	Figure 4	27
6.4	Figures 5-7	27
6.5	Figure 8	27
6.6	Figure 9	28
6.7	Figure 10	29
6.8	Figure 11	30
6.9	Figure 12	30
6.10	Figures A11-A13, Appendix	31
<b>7</b>	<b>Discussion</b>	<b>32</b>
7.1	Top-down, bottom-up	32
7.2	Juxtaposition	32
7.3	Mise-en-scene and realism	33
7.4	Connection to Jia Zhangke's general themes	33

<b>7.5 Implications</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>7.6 Limitations</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>8 Conclusion</b>	<b>35</b>
<b>References</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>Appendix</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Additional Figures</b>	<b>40</b>

## 1 Introduction

In this thesis I will examine the use of linguistic landscapes in film, how they can enhance storytelling and give depth to a fictional film. Linguistic landscape, as succinctly defined by Shohami (2010, p. 254) “presents a concrete text of actual language use in a particular time and place. It is a text created and bounded by geography and human habitation in a particular location”. Up to now, there have been limited studies of linguistic landscapes in film as it is a new field of study. Though fictional, films can provide an enduring snapshot of a particular time and place. Linguistic landscapes in film can provide information for the viewer about the film’s world, characters, story and themes (Kajszczarek, 2023). Their deliberate use can add depth and nuance to a film. In addition, studying linguistic landscapes in a film can hopefully give us insights about the society being portrayed.

I have chosen to focus on a film by Jia Zhangke, a leading figure of Chinese Sixth Generation filmmakers. This diverse group of Chinese directors “produced films that were often set in the contemporary post-Mao period, and they tended to favor an aesthetic that took inspiration from documentary cinema verité” (Berry et al., 2022). In contrast to current mainstream Chinese directors, Jia’s films generally operate on a smaller scale and deal with issues of identity and the challenges of rapid societal change (Berry et al., 2022). Change is one of Jia’s main themes (Szeto, 2009; Y. Wang, 2015). In his 30-year career, Jia Zhangke has garnered widespread acclaim and is now commonly considered to be one of the most important filmmakers not just in China, but in the world (*Directed by Jia Zhangke*, n.d.).

Jia Zhangke’s films are well-suited to this study, because of his extensive and meticulous use of linguistic landscapes. They often feature prominently in his films. For example, the brands he has chosen to include in his well-thought-out frames convey meaning, as they are picked to create a sense of realism or to serve a narrative function (Byrnes, 2012). Often these linguistic landscapes are easy to spot, like large commercial signs or painted Chinese characters in murals. Some are even featured in the subtitles. The impact of these texts can be heightened, because Jia’s protagonists are commonly quite taciturn. In fact, Jia frequently moves the story along just with images. His linguistic landscapes often juxtapose a new vibrant, hyper-commercial China with its flashy signs and brand names with the bleak, hopeless lives of the people this new China has left behind (Berry et al., 2022). Jia is known for his realism, and as

such his films can also function as kind of time capsules of a changing China, or at the very least, his own stylised perception of it.

In this thesis I examine how Jia Zhangke's common themes are displayed in his film *Still Life* from 2006. *Still Life* is set in a city in the scenic Three Gorges region. The city is being torn down to accommodate the massive Three Gorges Dam, which will put much of the surrounding area under water. In the film, two protagonists, coal miner Han Sanming and nurse Shen Hong, are trying to find their missing spouses. *Still Life* was critically well-received and touches on many of Jia's common themes (Berry et al., 2022; History of the Venice Film Festival, 2017; *Still Life* Critic Reviews, n.d.). It could therefore be considered a representative work of Jia Zhangke. Relevant to this study, there are conspicuous moments in *Still Life* when the camera guides the viewer's gaze towards a text and lingers on it for several seconds, suggesting a deeper meaning. This provided the impetus to study how these texts are used in the film and how they connect to the main themes of *Still Life* and the common themes of Jia Zhangke's films in general.

Besides linguistic landscape studies and scholarly work on Jia Zhangke's themes, I will draw on key concepts from film theory, such as mise-en-scene and juxtaposition, as part of my theoretical framework. For my methodology, I employ the qualitative method used in linguistic landscape analysis, as the aim of this study is to gain a more in-depth, detailed understanding of the texts that carry significant meaning. A qualitative approach "focuses more on the particular characteristics of a sign in a specific context, or on its makers or individual users" and will "often try to provide sensitivity to historical developments, social circumstances and the local context" (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024, p. 92). I will, however, include some quantitative results as well, as the methods are not mutually exclusive (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). Quantitatively, the data was categorised based on a commonly used distinction in linguistic landscape studies developed by Ben-Rafael and Shohamy (2006): official or top-down signs, and private or bottom-up signs. The focus will be on the concept of top-down signage as it's clearer to define in this context and offers a good starting point for examining the power relations depicted in the film.

For qualitative analysis, texts were chosen largely based on their prominence, and therefore significance, in the film. This prominence was determined by filmmaking techniques commonly used to direct viewer focus toward something on screen. Frequency in the film's

setting also contributed to prominence. In this interpretation and analysis of filmmaking techniques, I used mainly Bordwell's *Film Art: An Introduction* (2017), a well-established textbook on the matter (Bordwell et al., 2017). Timestamps will allow the reader to easily find the relevant parts in the film. I included still photos of the most relevant linguistic landscapes in the film, as visuals are a key component in this type of study. They can clarify and provide essential context.

## 2 Literary review

### 2.1 Linguistic landscape studies

Linguistic landscapes as an academic field of study started in the 1970s, was reignited in the 1990s, but gained full recognition as a distinct discipline from the mid-2000s onward (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). It is therefore a relatively new discipline. However, according to Shohamy (2010), studies in urban sociology dating back as far as a hundred years ago were a major contributor to the development of urban linguistic landscape research, so the field has historical foundations. The widely considered turning point was the publication of Landry and Bourhis's groundbreaking and frequently cited 1997 article "Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study" (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024; Landry & Bourhis, 1997). In their study, Landry and Bourhis (1997) defined linguistic landscapes as: "the visibility and salience of languages on public and commercial signs in a given territory or region" (p. 1).

This raises the question: what kind of signs are included? Landry and Bourhis (1997) originally decided on six types, among them public road signs, street names and adverts. As the field has matured, the scope of texts studied has expanded, from focusing on a specific type of text, like graffiti (Pennycook, 2009) or texts found in a specific setting, such as schools (Brown, 2012; Gorter & Cenoz, 2015; Szabó, 2015) to broader definitions like Lou's (2016a: 2) which states that "Linguistic landscape consists of all visual forms of language present in the public space of a pre-determined geographic area". Taking this further, Ben-Rafael and Ben-Rafael (Ben Refa'el & Ben-Refa'el, 2019, p. 1) posit that linguistic landscapes is "the symbolic construction of the public space by means of linguistic codes". The concept of public space refers to Jürgen Habermas's idea of public spheres that exist between the private sphere and the state (Habermas, 2011; Shohami, 2010).

There have been numerous attempts to give linguistic landscapes an exact definition and a unified theory, but beyond the broad definition of texts in a specific place at a given time, it's a somewhat futile exercise, because of the multidisciplinary nature of the field. However, this lack of cohesiveness can also be a strength, as different people can look at linguistic landscapes from different perspectives, both theoretical and methodological, and this freedom can lead to new innovations and new avenues of research (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024).

The study of linguistic landscapes is distinctly multidisciplinary and collaborative. It draws from, and contributes to, a variety of different disciplines not limited to linguistics, including psychology, sociology, language policy studies and onomastics (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024; Puzey, 2016; Shohamy, 2018). The discipline is dynamic, ever-evolving and growing fast. The number of new linguistic landscape publications has risen dramatically in the past 15 years (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024).

As can be imagined, linguistics is the starting point of many linguistic landscape studies. Linguistics subfields such as language variation studies, contact linguistics, applied linguistics, sociolinguistics and pragmatics have all been used in this capacity (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024). Landry and Bourhis (1997) used ethnolinguistic vitality theory in their highly influential study. Sociology has also been an important theoretical jumping-off point in linguistic landscape research. In their well-known paper from 2006, Ben-Rafael and Shohamy studied linguistic landscapes in Israeli cities and formulated their research questions based on theories of sociology (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006). Sociologist Erving Goffman's frame analysis theory (1974) has also been utilized in several linguistic landscape studies (Coupland & Garrett, 2010; Kallen, 2010). As these examples illustrate, all manner of theoretical frameworks have been used in the field. Gorter and Cenoz (2024) point out that even if this might seem somewhat scattershot, if this theoretical diversity keeps producing interesting new ideas and results, it's in fact a strength.

One key concept in linguistic landscape analysis is agency, i.e. who placed the sign. The data is commonly split into two categories, top-down and bottom-up. Top-down refers to institutional agencies or authorities, such as governmental, and are therefore official. Bottom-up, on the other hand, denotes signs placed by private actors. According to Ben-Rafael et al. (2006, p. 4), top-down signs reflect "a general commitment to the dominant culture". Studying and comparing how these two types of linguistic landscape items feature and interact can help researchers understand and analyse power relations. As the more powerful of the two, public top-down actors can have influence over bottom-up actors (Shohami, 2010). For example, a new regime can notably alter a linguistic landscape (Shohami, 2010) and thus bring to bear new ideologies and motives. Of course, top-down and bottom-up are not always clear-cut categories as public spaces are complex social constructs (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024).

This can, however, be a useful framework in linguistic landscape studies and is consequently widely used.

Not only is there a wide variety of theoretical frameworks in linguistic landscape studies, but also in methodological approaches. However, one thing has remained constant: researchers need to collect data of their chosen linguistic landscape to analyze it. Photography has been considered the best and the most common way to do this (Gorter & Cenoz, 2024), even though in recent years video has emerged as a viable alternative with distinct benefits (Troyer & Szabó, 2017). As with photography, video is inevitably subjective. No matter how carefully a linguistic landscape is recorded on video, it cannot capture everything. Due to framing, things are left out or kept in.

Finally, then, where do fictional films fall in all this? Fictional films, even if they are set in the real world, are highly curated creative works, and therefore arguably even more subjective than traditional subjects of linguistic landscape studies. Films themselves have, of course, been studied extensively. Therefore, besides linguistic landscape studies, in this study I will also draw on film theory and analysis. The technical side of filmmaking will be covered in the methodology chapter as it directly relates to how I analysed my data. Here, suffice it to say that filmmakers use techniques like focus, different types of framing and shot length to direct the viewer's focus. These techniques are important in establishing intent; the director wants the viewer to pay attention to something. Besides these, I introduce here two filmmaking concepts that are relevant to this thesis as they form a part of my theoretical framework: mise-en-scene and juxtaposition.

## **2.2 Mise-en-scene and juxtaposition**

According to Film Art (2017), mise-en-scene contains everything that is included in the frame, such as staging, lighting and setting. Though it tends to be planned, filmmakers can also make use of fortuitous circumstances by including them in the mise-en-scene (Bordwell et al., 2017). The concept traces its origins to theater, and there are commonalities with its application in both theater and film, such as spatial arrangement and actor movement (Segal & Antonio, 2021). Through mise-en-scene, filmmakers can build a three-dimensional space (Segal & Antonio, 2021) and create a sense of authenticity and realism (Bordwell et al., 2017). For example, in Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (2000), various styles of jackets were

employed to convey realistically the passage of time in a small city in Shanxi (Berry et al., 2022).

Juxtaposition is a filmmaking technique that contrasts different components, such as images, thematic elements or scenes, to accentuate their differences or create a new meaning all together (Juxtaposition In Film - A Powerful Tool For Storytelling, 2024). It can be used to invoke abstract themes (Bordwell et al., 2017). Creating juxtaposition through editing came to the fore in early Soviet Union cinema. According Film Art (2017), in the Soviet montage editing "two shots together give birth to a feeling or idea not present in either one" (Bordwell et al., 2017, p. 472). Things can also be juxtaposed within the same shot by using mise-en-scene (Juxtaposition In Film - A Powerful Tool For Storytelling, 2024). Juxtaposition is an important part of a filmmaker's repertoire.

### 2.3 Jia Zhangke

As stated in the introduction, Jia Zhangke is considered to be the leading light of the Sixth Generation of Chinese filmmakers (Berry et al., 2022). Interestingly, Kevin Lee (2001) has pointed out how Jia aesthetic wasn't commonly examined in contrast to preceding Chinese Fifth Generation directors like Chen Kaige or Zhang Yimou, even though Jia has repeatedly proclaimed films like Chen Kaige's *Yellow Earth* as major influences (Berry et al., 2022; Lee, 2001). Rather, critical comparisons tend to focus on Jia's Urban Generation peers and international art house cinema. Italian neorealist influences are also mentioned by several scholars (Byrnes, 2012; Szeto, 2009). Jia Zhangke has often cited the seminal French director Robert Bresson as an inspiration, a shared admiration of Bresson even connecting Jia to his most important long-term collaborator, cinematographer Nelson Yu Lik-Wai (Berry et al., 2022). In this Venn diagram of influences, the intersection seems to be realism.

Indeed, much has been written about the realism in Jia Zhangke's films. Jason McGrath (2007) contends that Jia's realism is influenced by both the post-socialist sensibilities of Chinese Sixth Generation filmmakers and international art house cinema (McGrath, 2007). Whereas socialist realism was characterised by ideology, the Chinese post-socialist filmmakers sought to chip away the ideological veneer to reveal life as is (McGrath, 2007). According to Corey Byrnes (2012), though Jia clearly draws from different schools of cinematic realism, his own personal style in *Still Life* is a mix of various influences. Apart from realism, Jia also incorporates elements of traditional Chinese aesthetics, like paintings,

that are “far more concerned with essences than appearances, spirit than matter” (Byrnes, 2012). Jia Zhangke himself has said that his films, instead of being documentary-like, aim to have “a sense of authenticity” (Berry et al., 2022, p. 84). In other words, they try to capture an essence.

According to Qi Wang (2014), in Jia’s films, the “camera remains non-intruding yet attentive, anonymous yet conscious, placing the spectator in a sensitive position“ (Q. Wang, 2014, p. 96). Jia uses film techniques associated with non-fiction, like deep focus, long takes and meditative pacing to create a sense of objectivity and detachment (Byrnes, 2012; Liu, 2006), but by intensifying and amplifying these methods to the utmost, the end result is distinctly non-realist, even fanciful; “a new form” (Byrnes, 2012, p. 6). In *Still Life*, he also frequently breaks this preceding illusion of realism with something extravagant, surreal and playful, like a UFO shooting across the sky. Reality suddenly becomes unreality (Byrnes, 2012).

The daily struggles of the ordinary and marginalized people of China are a key theme and through line in the films of Jia Zhangke from the very beginning (Szeto, 2009). His films also explore the discrepancy between dreams and reality in the lives of his characters (McGrath, 2007). In *The World* (2004), this gap is highlighted by juxtaposing scenes of glamorous shows and seemingly romantic locales with the distinctly unglamorous, even depressing, lives of the people behind the show (Berry et al., 2022). Kevin Lee (2001) remarks how Jia’s characters are often lost at sea, unable to deal with the fast-changing circumstances they don’t quite understand.

The changing urban landscape of modern China is one of Jia’s main thematic preoccupations. In this he is not alone. According to Sheldon H. Lu in *The Urban Generation* (2007), demolition and destruction of urban landscapes has become an important theme in Chinese visual culture (Lu, 2007). For example, the photographer Wang Jinsong’s *One Hundred Signs of Demolition* (1999) features pictures of the oft-seen Chinese character 拆 (chāi, “tear down, demolish”) painted on structures tagged for demolition. The character is a crystal-clear symbol of change and destruction (Lu, 2007). Out with the old, in with the new. Yomi Braester (2007) makes the case that since the 1990s Jia and his filmmaking peers have played a significant role in documenting these rapidly changing and disappearing urban landscapes (Braester, 2007). Jia deals with this topic and the resulting displacement in many of his films, like *Xiao Wu* (1997), though perhaps nowhere more prominently than in *Still Life*. Jia has

talked about how, when filming *Still Life*, he felt a sense of urgency, because the location where the film is set and shot in, Fengjie, was changing so fast (Berry et al., 2022).

According to Braester (2007), the forceful moulding of urban landscapes by the PRC can be seen as a demonstration of power. Therefore, as Cecilia Mello (2019) argues, Jia's insistent observation and documentation of it can be seen "almost as an act of resistance" to it (Braester, 2007; Mello, 2019). The images of these crumbling towns and cities also serve a storytelling function. Amid the rubble, the characters in the film appear isolated and alone, heightening the sense of alienation and being lost (Berry et al., 2022).

How, then, do linguistic landscapes come into this? As signs and texts are an inseparable part of any urban environment, often playing a key role in transmitting information, both official (top-down) or private (bottom-up), studying linguistic landscapes through this framework can hopefully help us understand the power dynamics in Fengjie as depicted in *Still Life*. It would also make sense that Jia Zhangke's consistent themes mentioned above would carry over to the linguistic landscapes of his films. In this thesis I study if and how these themes are manifested in the linguistic landscapes of *Still Life*.

### 3 Background: The Three Gorges Dam

As *Still Life* deals with the people affected by the Three Gorges Dam, a massive infrastructure project with wide-ranging consequences, some background information will help the reader better understand the topics discussed in this thesis.

The Three Gorges Dam is the world's largest dam, spanning the Yangzi River in Yiling District in Hubei province, downstream from the culturally significant Three Gorges area (Harrell, 2023). For a sense of scale, the water level above the dam can be about 110 meters higher than below it (Harrell, 2023). As can be imagined, building the dam was a giant undertaking and not without controversy (Wilmsen, 2016). The idea of the dam dates back over a hundred years, but construction of it started in 1993 (Harrell, 2023). The plant became fully operational in 2012. As a large area of the culturally and historically significant Three Gorges region would go underwater due to the dam, the Chinese government set up a massive archaeological salvage project to preserve at least some of this valuable heritage (Harrell, 2023). Besides historical buildings and relics, over a million people living in the region were forced to relocate, leading to all manner of social problems (Wilmsen, 2016). Also, as can be imagined, the dam also brought about vast ecological changes (Harrell, 2023). In short, the Three Gorges Dam marked a profound restructuring of the whole region and irrevocably altered the lives of people living there.

Jia Zhangke had dealt with China's rapidly changing urban landscape in his previous films, but as *Still Life* takes place during the construction of the Three Gorges Dam, and the resulting demolition and dislocation, these themes are central to the film. Dislocation is directly connected to coping with change, and the alienation it can lead to, which are themes observed throughout Jia's body of work (Berry et al., 2022).

## 4 Methodology

In linguistic landscape studies, there is still no widely accepted methodology for data collection and analysis (Leimgruber, 2020; Tufi & Blackwood, 2010). This is also true of linguistic landscape studies of fictional films, as it's a less explored subfield. Troyer and Szabó consider video collection methods used in linguistic landscape research inherently subjective (Troyer & Szabó, 2017). It would logically follow that studying linguistic landscapes in a fictional feature film is even more subjective as it's a pre-written and carefully edited artistic creation. The goal here, then, is not to achieve objectivity, but to view how the film depicts a specific time and place. As such is the case, I will also rely on film theory and criticism as well as linguistic landscape analysis.

### 4.1 Establishing intent through film theory and technique

There is no one-to-one correlation between a certain type of filmmaking technique and meaning, as filmmakers use techniques differently to express different things. That said, specific techniques can create distinct effects, like direct the viewer's attention toward something on screen. Certain methods are consistently used to guide the viewers' focus. This is relevant to my study of linguistic landscapes in *Still Life*, because the director's use of these established filmmaking methods can demonstrate intent; he wants the viewer to pay attention to something on screen, therefore making it more likely to carry meaning. In assigning meaning through filmmaking techniques, I rely heavily on *Film Art: An Introduction* by Bordwell et al. (2017).

First, a brief overview of filmmaking shot types relevant to this thesis, as they will be referred to frequently. A long shot, or a wide shot, portrays the people in it in relation to their surroundings. In it the people are smaller, and the emphasis is on the environment (Bordwell et al., 2017). Long shots can induce the viewer to look for details and patterns, because they cover a large space and contain lots of information. A long take, on the other hand, refers to a shot in a film that is unusually long in duration, uninterrupted by cuts (Bordwell et al., 2017). Long take is an artistic choice by the filmmaker. A cut in film incites the viewer to shift attention to new visual stimuli, a new image (Segal & Antonio, 2021). Instead of cutting the scene into many shorter shots, in a long take the scene is shot in one long continuous shot. To sustain the viewer's attention in a long take, filmmakers use techniques like camera movement, which makes the viewer look forward to what comes next in the shot, and

different shot sizes within the take (Segal & Antonio, 2021). In static long take shots, where the camera doesn't move at all, filmmakers can sustain the audience's attention with things like a well-designed mise-en-scene, engaging dialogue or narrative (Segal & Antonio, 2021). Static long takes foreground the present (Segal & Antonio, 2021). Jia Zhangke and his long-term cinematographer Yu Lik-Wai are well-known for long shots and long takes (Berry et al., 2022; Byrnes, 2012). Lastly, a point-of-view shot shows the viewer what the character sees. This is commonly done by first showing the character looking at something, then editing in a shot of what the character would see from their viewpoint (Bordwell et al., 2017).

Filmmakers use various techniques, such as contrast, framing and focus, in directing the viewer's eye toward something. Contrast refers to the difference between extremes of light and dark in an image (Bordwell et al., 2017). Contrast grabs the viewer's attention as it can make elements more easily noticeable in a frame (Bordwell et al., 2017). Framing and focus are important tools in the filmmaker's arsenal in guiding the viewer's focus. Putting something front and center in the frame immediately directs the viewer's attention to it. Framing can stress details important to the film's narrative (Bordwell et al., 2017). In framing a shot, directors tend to keep in frame what's essential and leave out the inessential, as inessential elements can distract the viewer (Pirilä et al., 2017). However, as there is no direct formula for decoding meaning in framing, context is essential.

Controlling what is in or out of focus in the shot can also guide attention. Selective focus emphasises and forces the viewer to the part of the frame that is in focus, as it's natural to focus on what's visible (Bordwell et al., 2017). This contrasts with deep focus, where even the background is in focus. Deep focus enables longer takes, and it can be used to create a sense of objectivity (Bordwell et al., 2017). Digital cameras allow filmmakers to shoot in deep focus more easily than traditional film. *Still Life* was shot in digital format, and deep focus is used extensively in the film (Byrnes, 2012). Because of this, it's easier to observe objects and details in the background. Deep focus often calls for deep-space staging (Bordwell et al., 2017).

This leads us to the concept of mise-en-scene, introduced in the literary review chapter. It means things included in the frame, such as staging, lighting and setting. Relevant to this study, setting includes what are called props, meaning objects that are included in the frame. They can serve a narrative function or act as a motif (Bordwell et al., 2017). Props can also

anchor the film to a given time period (Berry et al., 2022). In this study I pay close attention to the *Still Life*'s mise-en-scene. If a text appears multiple times, it's more likely to carry meaning.

## 4.2 Data collection

I started by watching the film and pausing whenever text appeared on-screen. This includes all text in any language anywhere on-screen. When text appeared on-screen, I wrote down the exact time it appeared or was most visible. Any piece of written text was considered as a single item. If several snippets of legible text, for example, graffiti and bottle with a brand name, were visible on-screen at the same time, both are registered as separate items. When text appeared on-screen, but it was not decipherable due to distance, graininess, unclear font, etc., it was marked down as illegible with the context it was seen in. All texts, including illegible, were written down with a corresponding timestamp, but illegible texts were excluded from further analysis. The timestamp notes the exact time (hour, minute, second) the text appears on-screen, though on occasion it was beneficial to wait a few extra seconds after the initial appearance to get a clearer view of the text. The observed texts with their timestamps were written down in chronological order, the order in which they appear in the film. This comprehensive initial cataloging of linguistic landscapes in *Still Life* provided a solid base from which it was easier to search for noteworthy details, patterns and meaning, using the previously listed filmmaking techniques as a guide. Especially important linguistic landscapes will also be accompanied by a freeze-frame still image to clarify and provide essential context.

I sorted the raw data (texts and corresponding timestamps) according to:

- The linguistic landscape concept of top-down vs bottom-up signs, as used by Ben-Rafael and Shohamy (Ben-Rafael et al., 2006)
- Filmmaking techniques such as juxtaposition
- Consistent themes of Jia Zhangke's films mentioned in the literary review chapter, such as demolition and dislocation

The focus will be on top-down signage as they feature prominently in the film. The concept of top-down/bottom-up will be treated as a starting point for the analysis of power relations visible in the linguistic landscapes of the film, not as a rigid framework for quantitative

analysis. If elements appeared in the mise-en-scene of the film several times, more attention was paid to them, as frequency can be a marker of meaning. The use of attention-guiding filmmaking techniques in displaying linguistic landscapes in the film was interpreted to signal meaning, therefore meriting further analysis.

### 4.3 Limitations

My chosen method is by no means a comprehensive way to understand this, or any other, film. Nor is it striving to be such. By focusing just on linguistic landscapes, i.e. text, it's limited by design. However, even in this limited capacity, it has some clear issues. First, not everything is intentional in a film. Filmmaking is a collective endeavour that involves many people with different areas of expertise. Though Jia Zhangke fits comfortably into the definition of an auteur director, the auteur theory itself has clear issues and its worth has been debated for decades (Andrews, 2012). Suffice it to say, not even the most hands-on director is in total control of the filmmaking process, from vision to execution. There are uncontrollable variables simply because of the scale of the endeavour and the number of people involved (Chitwood, 2021). Though Jia wrote and directed *Still Life*, members of the cast and crew, such as the cinematographer and editor, collaborate with the director in deciding what is included in the film and what is not. Inevitably, chance also plays a role (for example, the availability of props, locations, etc.). Furthermore, according to Jia Zhangke, *Still Life* was shot hastily and he wrote the screenplay in just 5-6 days (Berry et al., 2022). Such a tight schedule reduces control and increases the role of luck and chance. One clear practical limitation is the quality of the print. Often, a text appears on-screen but is illegible. On the other hand, if the director wanted the viewer to be aware of a particular text, it would've probably been made more legible in the first place. Finally, there's the issue of confirmation bias, or trying to shoehorn something into a perceived pattern or theory. Before starting my data gathering, I had not decided on an angle to pursue, so that should at least lessen research bias.

Like I stated previously, the methodology used in this thesis is far from an all-inclusive way to understand a film, nor is it meant as such. It can, however, potentially highlight interesting facets of a film that might otherwise be missed or overlooked. The research here will hopefully provide some insight into whether this type of linguistic landscape analysis of a film can be a fruitful endeavour.

## 5 Findings

According to my data gathering, there are 83 instances in *Still Life* where text appears on-screen. Of these 83 instances, 13 were recognisable as text, but classified as illegible. Opening and closing credits are not included in this statistic.



Figure 1. 0:47. Bottle of 诗仙太白 (shīxiān tàibái, "Poetry Immortal Li Bai").



Figure 2. 1:39:20. Bottle of 诗仙太白. Besides the two appearances shown in Figures 1-2, the same bottle appears in *Still Life* 5 other times: at 13:57, 34:52, 1:06:06, 1:23:28 and 1:36:17. For pictures of all these, see Appendix Figures A1-A5.



Figure 3. 33:25. Poster 诺基亚，五一音乐季 (nuòjīyà, wǔyī yīnyuè jì, "Nokia, May Day Music Festival").



Figure 4. 46:43. Packet of 巫山云雾 (wūshān yúnwù, "Wushan Clouds and Mist") tea, in traditional Chinese characters. 茶 (chá, "tea") superimposed.

A large rectangular inn sign makes three appearances in *Still Life*. One side of the sign features the name of the inn, 唐人阁客栈 (táng rén gé kè zhàn, "Tang dynasty person pavilion inn"), the other the common Chinese saying 欢迎光临 (huān yíng guāng lín, "welcome").



Figure 1. 25:38. “欢迎光临，唐人阁客栈” on a lit sign.



Figure 6. 1:20:23. Sign from 25:38 being torn down.



Figure 2. 1:27:52. Sign from 25:40 and 1:20:23 leaning against a wall.



Figure 8. 56:41. 企业家联谊会 (qiyè jiā liányì huì, "Entrepreneurs Association").



Figure 9. 58:02. Photo of a building being demolished. 2002年1月24日，县教委大楼爆破拆除 (2002 nián 1 yuè 24 rì, xiàn jiàowěi dàlóu bàopò chāichú, "On January 24, 2002, the County Education Commission building was demolished by blasting").



Figure 10. 1:19:24. 拆 painted on a wall.



Figure 11. 13:02. Men painting characters on a brick wall: 156.50M 三期水位线 (sān qī shuǐwèi xiàn, "phase 3 water level").



Figure 12. 1:24:48. 156.50M 三期水位线 painted on a brick wall.

## 6 Analysis

### 6.1 Figures 1-2

A bottle of 诗仙太白 branded liquor appears in *Still Life* a total of seven times. It makes its first appearance in the opening shot of the film, a slow-moving tracking shot that lasts several minutes. It shows people on a boat engaging in various activities and waiting around. As some men are playing cards, a hand comes off-camera and puts down a bottle of 诗仙太白 on the table, seen in Figure 1. The bottle is in the middle of the frame, highly visible, and therefore likely meant to be noticed. The bottle comes up time and time again in the mise-en-scene, a total of 7 times, not as prominently as in the first scene, but still detectable by its design if not by text, standing between characters or next to them. It makes its last appearance in the second to last scene of the film, this time even more prominently than the first time. See Figure 2. There are three bottles of 诗仙太白 on a table. At least one bottle is in the frame for approximately 40 seconds; and center, or just off center, of the frame for over 20 seconds. Its visibility is further enhanced by high contrast: the bottle with its bright red and yellow label stands out from the surrounding muted color palette. These choices by the filmmaker (framing, shot length, contrast, frequency in the mise-en-scene) support the argument that the director wants the viewer to notice it. In fact, Jia Zhangke has said how he designed the opening shot and its mise-en-scene extremely carefully (Berry et al., 2022).

Featured in the first and second to last scenes, the bottle sort of bookends the film. Its frequent and prominent use seems very deliberate. What then, is it supposed to mean? The name of the liquor brand, 诗仙太白, is a direct reference to the poet Li Bai (701-762?), who, alongside fellow Tang dynasty poet Du Fu (712-770), is considered the most famous poet in Chinese history (Mair, 2001). The liquor is local to the region (公司简介-重庆诗仙太白酒业有限公司) [Company Profile-Chongqing Shixian Taibai Wine Co., Ltd.], n.d.). Li Bai has a connection to the Three Gorges area, which is highlighted in an earlier scene in the film. In that scene, a ship cruises down the Yangzi River while a tour guide recites Li Bai's famous poem "Setting Out at Dawn from Baidi". The director, Jia Zhangke, has talked about how Li Bai, living in the 8th century, observed the same landscapes in the Three Gorges that people do today (Berry et al., 2022). By including Li Bai in different ways, linguistic landscapes and diegetic (part of the film's world, as experienced by the characters) reading of his poem, Jia links the present to the past. The distinctive opening shot, where the bottle makes its first

appearance, was designed to resemble a traditional Chinese scroll painting (Berry et al., 2022). By linking and contrasting the Three Gorges in the early 2000s, destruction and ruin, to the rich Chinese artistic traditions of old, the film seems to underline the tragedy of the current situation.

## 6.2 Figure 3

The male protagonist, Han Sanming, is looking for his wife and daughter, who left 16 years ago. The daughter of the woman in Figure 3 went to school with Han Sanming's daughter. The ad/poster we see is apparently the woman's best picture of her child. She comments on how her daughter lives far away. Based on the limited information we have, they seem estranged. This would tie into Jia's theme of alienation. Her connection to her daughter is mediated through an advertisement for Nokia, promoting 诺基亚, 五一音乐季 "Nokia May Day Music Festival". The glossy advertisement with the cheerful picture of a girl jumping up while playing a saxophone is contrasted to her mother's unglamorous life in Fengjie. Based on the limited information we have, it seems the woman is not in contact with her daughter, same as Han Sanming. There's irony here, as Nokia sells cellphones that make keeping in contact easy. Their slogan, not clearly visible under the logo, was "Connecting People". Nokia was an influential company in China when *Still Life* was made ('Nokia Says Greater China Sales Grew 39 Pct in 2006', 2007). The poster represents a glossy, global consumer ideal, seemingly worlds apart from Fengjie. Thus, the distance between the girl pictured in the poster and the people observing it appears heightened.

This theme of picture vs the real thing is found elsewhere in the film too. Most prominently, at 26:30 Han Sanming is comparing the picture of Kuimen on a 10-yuan bill to the real spot on the Yangzi River. See Figure A6 in the Appendix.

Late in the film, three characters dressed in Beijing Opera garb are sitting at a table and one of them is playing a game on what appears to be Nokia's N-Gage gaming phone, very emblematic of the era. With this image, traditional culture, Beijing Opera, is contrasted with the modern world of mobile gaming. This juxtaposition of traditional Chinese culture and modern China is also seen elsewhere in the film; see section about Figures 1-2.

### 6.3 Figure 4

*Still Life* is divided into sections by four superimposed characters appearing on-screen: 烟 Cigarettes, 酒 Liquor, 茶 Tea and 糖 Toffee (which could more broadly be translated as sugar, sweets or candy). The shot in which 茶 appears also contains a bag of tea, branded 巫山云雾. Wushan county neighbors Fengjie in the Chongqing Municipality, so the tea is local to the region. For pictures of the three other superimposed characters, see Appendix A7-A9.

### 6.4 Figures 5-7

One side of the sign features the name of the inn, 唐人阁客栈, the other the common Chinese saying 欢迎光临, which is a ubiquitous phrase heard in all types of businesses in China upon entering. In the film, when we first see the sign in Figure 5, it is lit and welcoming. By using contrast, brightly lit sign in a dark alleyway, the director draws attention to it. The next time we see the sign, Figure 6, it's being forcefully torn down the wall, unlit, no longer useful and functional, but something to be removed. It's a long shot with the sign front and center. The inn is defunct, and the sign no longer serves a purpose. It has become useless debris. The sign's last appearance, seen in Figure 7, is bleak; it leans on a wall discarded and defeated. The main character is walking in an alleyway when he stops to look at the now discarded sign leaning against the wall. The shot lasts several seconds.

The journey of the inn sign is clearly a storytelling device and not a random inclusion. This is supported by the previously mentioned techniques of contrast, shot length and central framing. The director is guiding the viewer's eye toward it. The sign's journey could be interpreted to mirror the displacement of the local population of Fengjie. The sign's greeting of welcome, 欢迎光临, becomes ironic after it's torn down and the light is switched off; people are no longer welcome in the inn or, by extension, the town itself. The movement of the sign can be interpreted to symbolise the dislocation and displacement of the people of Fengjie.

### 6.5 Figure 8

There is a scene in *Still Life* where demolition workers are playing mahjong in shabby surroundings when a shirtless man walks in holding his bloody head. He had been attacked by a crew from a different building. Enraged by this transgression, the colleagues of the injured

worker decide to inflict swift revenge. The battered worker is then bandaged by the female protagonist Shen Hong, a nurse. The next scene shows Shen Hong with Wang Dongming walking up steep, long stairs in search of Shen Hong's husband, Guo Bin. Stairs are a commonly used motif in film, often symbolising social mobility (Babineau et al., 2003). At the top of the stairs, they enter a fancy lobby replete with billiards and table tennis, worlds apart from the dilapidated setting of the previous scene featuring the workers. The massive golden letters behind the reception counter say 企业家联谊会 (“Entrepreneurs Association”). Here Jia Zhangke is juxtaposing the reality of the workers with that of the people in charge. The previous scene's dilapidated mise-en-scene is contrasted to the comfortable and affluent one in the next scene. The resplendent golden text in the lobby serves to heighten this contrast between the two groups.

## 6.6 Figure 9

Demolition and displacement feature heavily in *Still Life* and these themes also come across in the linguistic landscapes of the film, sometimes explicitly so. An example of this can be seen in figure 8, where the camera pans slowly over a picture of a building being flattened by an implosion. The text below the picture states matter-of-factly the date and the name of the building. Why is this picture on the wall of the bathroom in the 企业家联谊会 building mentioned in the analysis of Figure 8? It's next to a framed biography and photo of Ms. Ding Yaling, president of Hehe Group. In this context, the demolition picture seems almost celebratory, a mark of progress. We follow Shen Hong in this scene as she continues her search of her missing husband Bin Bin. Shen Hong already before this scene has had reason to suspect that Ding Yaling is her husband Bin Bin's mistress. The panning shot that shows us first the profile of Ms. Ding and then the demolished building is a point of view shot, putting us in Shen Hong's shoes. Besides simply being a shot of a building being razed down, it seems to have another meaning provided by context. By linking these two pictures together with a point-of-view panning shot, center screen and in focus, it seems Jia Zhangke is trying to make a connection between the two. The pictures of her husband's suspected mistress and the building being demolished could be interpreted to symbolise the end, or crashing down, of the relationship between Shen Hong and her husband. Besides dealing directly with the general themes of the film, demolition and dislocation, the shot also serves a narrative function.

## 6.7 Figure 10

The big 拆 painted on a building, seen in Figure 9, is an example of top-down signage. The old man seen in the middle of the frame confronts the men who painted it, demanding to know who told them to do so. “Government orders” is the worker’s reply. The old man protests, but there’s an inevitability to the 拆 mark. The white 拆 immediately draws the viewer’s attention due to its size and high contrast to the surrounding environment. It’s a long shot, emphasising people in relation to their surroundings. As can be seen in Figure 9, people are still in the condemned building, looking out from the windows, living their lives. The scene is shot in a long take that lasts approximately 20 seconds, with the 拆 sign visible for about 10 seconds. The camera moves as it follows the old man walking down the stairs. The camera movement makes the viewer anticipate what will appear next in the shot. To the right of the frame, a woman with a toddler appears. As the old man stops to rest at the bottom of the stairs, the toddler waddles in to join him in the middle of the frame. Because of the way the scene is shot (size and contrast of the sign, long shot, long take, camera movement anticipating action, mise-en-scene of the condemned building with people still in it and the old man), the director seems to encourage a deeper viewing.

As previously mentioned, stairs can be used as a metaphor for social mobility (Babineau et al., 2003). The old man is walking down the stairs. In this case, it would be fitting, as the old man is driven from his home and place of business, meaning his social status has immediately declined dramatically due to the 拆 sign. Down the steps, down in the social hierarchy. At the bottom of the stairs, as the old man stops to stand in the middle of the frame, a toddler walks from the right of the frame to the middle, therefore immediately noticeable. The old man is contrasted to the toddler. This juxtaposition seems to highlight the changing of the guard. There is no place for the old man in Fengjie anymore. He had in the previous shot exclaimed to the men painting the sign that he had lived in Fengjie for a long time and has many friends there. Therefore, his sudden removal and dislocation from the town seems almost like an erasure of history. This erasure of history is a theme in *Still Life*. Jia Zhangke has talked about how he was shocked to see a town, Fengjie, with thousands of years of history being reduced to rubble (Berry et al., 2022). According to Jia, individuals confronted with such monumental change are “simply...pushed aside and swept away” (Berry et al., 2022) This can be seen in the case of the old man in the film. The scene serves to highlight the human cost of the Three Gorges Dam project.

## 6.8 Figure 11

In *Still Life*, there are three shots of signs of projected water levels in Fengjie, seen in figure 11 and figure A10 in the Appendix. These are official, or top-down, signs indicating how high the water level will be in “phase three”. Figure 11 clearly illustrates how the water level will be substantially higher than current ground level, therefore effectively submerging the whole area. It’s a long shot, emphasising people in relation to their surroundings. The camera lingers on this text for over 10 seconds and subtly zooms in on the text the workers are finishing up. These methods indicate that the viewer is encouraged to pay attention to the text. The water level mark is a concrete indicator of things to come, highlighting the inevitable dislocation of the people in the area. As can be seen in the picture, people are going about their daily lives. While the surroundings are run-down, there’s still a community here. This is underscored by the use of the long shot.

## 6.9 Figure 12

The third water level sign appears at a dramatic moment in the film. In the preceding shot to the sign’s appearance, the male protagonist, Han Sanming, is in a demolition worksite. He and his fellow workers are looking out of a condemned building at an oncoming storm. Han Sanming calls up his young friend, Brother Mark, and as we hear Sanming’s phone’s waiting tone, Brother Mark’s recognisable ringtone starts to play out in the very same construction site. Alarmed, Han Sanming starts looking for his friend. The next shot seemingly presents us Sanming’s perspective as he looks around the worksite. The moving camera makes the audience anticipate what comes next into frame. The searching camera then presents us the water level marker, in full view through an opening in the wall. The camera lingers on the text for several seconds, it’s center frame and highly visible due to its red lettering (contrast), therefore meaningful. Sanming locates the origin of the ringtone under a pile of bricks and screams for help. His friend is found dead, likely due to a violent retaliation from a rival gang of workers. By including a water level sign a third time, this time connecting it to a death within the same shot, the director seems to highlight the human cost of the ongoing demolitions. We never actually see how Brother Mark died, but being buried under a pile of demolition rubble strengthens the argument that we are supposed to directly connect demolition to his death.

## 6.10 Figures A11-A13, Appendix

There are a few instances in the film where a small piece of text appearing in the background seems to comment on the visuals. At the beginning of the film, the first time we see the male protagonist, Han Sanming, he is sitting on a boat and looking pensive, as if he's lost in deep thought. This is part of the long opening scene discussed earlier, filmed in one continuous shot. Right next to his head there's a torn sticker. The sticker says 安心, at ease, even though he clearly seems distracted. With this juxtaposition, the director seems to highlight internal conflict in Han Sanming. However, the sticker is quite small, so its significance is debatable. In another instance, a scroll with the text 努力 (nǔlì, "to make an effort, to try hard") is hung on a demolition worksite. See Figures A11 and A12 in the Appendix.

In another scene, Shen Hong and Wang Dongming have come to an upscale evening party to continue their search for Shen Hong's missing husband, Bin Bin. Amid the couples dancing, the camera pans to Shen Hong, who is standing alone, lost in thought. Next to her there's a poster of a cruise ship, ostensibly a travel advertisement. It's not centrally framed, but it stands out due to contrast and proximity to Shen Hong. The text in the ad says 纵情天, which translates to "indulge in heaven". It could also say 纵情天涯, as the poster is not fully visible. The flashy poster is contrasted to the downcast Shen Hong in the mise-en-scene. Its text becomes ironic: Shen Hong likely doesn't consider confronting her missing husband, who probably has an extramarital affair, "indulging in heaven". See Figure A13 in the Appendix.

## 7 Discussion

### 7.1 Top-down, bottom-up

As per Shohami (2010), top-down signs and actors in *Still Life* clearly have influence over bottom-up ones. The most prominent bottom-up sign in the film, the blocky white and red inn sign discussed in detail above, is at the mercy of official top-down forces. Its journey reflects the upheavals experienced by the ordinary people in the film. The signs in the film distinguishable as top-down characterise decision-making out of the reach of the common people of Fengjie. In two examples involving top-down signage, Figures 10 and 11, the residents are seemingly informed of their dislocation in real time. The workers are still painting or have just finished painting the texts. There are no extended notices, just a plain expression of facts using minimal text: this house will be demolished, the water level will be this high. The film seems to imply that the residents have very little agency in this process, they are simply being told what will happen by the authorities. The chain of command is very much top-down.

### 7.2 Juxtaposition

The filmmaking technique of juxtaposition is used often in *Still Life* (Figures 1-3, 8, 10, A11 and A13). In Chris Berry's *Jia Zhangke on Jia Zhangke* (2022), Jia talks about how he studied the works of Sergei Eisenstein, the creator of the Soviet Montage Theory, extensively in film school. Eisenstein's montage famously juxtaposes shots of two seemingly separate things to create a new third meaning (Bordwell et al., 2017). Besides contrasting two separate shots, elements within the same shot can be juxtaposed in the mise-en-scene (Juxtaposition In Film - A Powerful Tool For Storytelling, 2024). Jia Zhangke uses the filmmaking technique of juxtaposition in many of his films, often subtly, but occasionally more overtly. Sometimes the lives of two characters are contrasted (Szeto, 2009; Y. Wang, 2015), or like in *A Touch of Sin* (2013), a character is juxtaposed with animal imagery (Y. Wang, 2015). Music also offers a point of juxtaposition, as Jia contrasts pop songs with action on screen (Szeto, 2009). In *The World*, the luxury of the haves is juxtaposed with the bleak reality of the have-nots (Berry et al., 2022), similarly to *Still Life*. Jia Zhangke has, therefore, used this filmmaking method before and after *Still Life*. Not surprising, considering it's simply a part of a filmmaker's toolkit and Jia's own proclaimed interest in Eisenstein. It's doubtful that directors think of

text usage in a film separately, isolated from the whole. Therefore, the use of juxtaposition in the linguistic landscapes of *Still Life* is just a continuation of Jia's general themes and style.

### 7.3 Mise-en-scene and realism

The linguistic landscapes seen in the film demonstrate a sophisticated and thoughtful use of mise-en-scene. In *Still Life*, the filmmaking techniques of deep focus, long shot and long take all contribute to making a rich use of mise-en-scene possible (Byrnes, 2012). Jia Zhangke and his team make use of this by including all kinds of interesting details and props in the mise-en-scene that enrich the film. These props can provide a sense of place and time and anchor the film in reality. Elements in the mise-en-scene can be used as motifs in a film, as discussed in *Film Art: An Introduction* (2017). In *Still Life*, props like the bottles of 诗仙太白 and the blocky inn sign are used in this capacity.

Jia Zhangke is known for realism, even though the exact nature of his realism is much debated. His films, it could be said, aim to capture the feel of a time and place. In the linguistic landscapes of *Still Life*, this comes across in the choice of props. The 诗仙太白 liquor of Figures 1-2, and the 巫山云雾 tea of Figure 4, are both local products and connected to the Three Gorges region. The Nokia poster, seen in Figure 4, is a mark of globalisation in Fengjie and emblematic of the time. The liquor bottles seen in Figure A8 in the Appendix appear to be 山西汾酒 (shānxī fénjiǔ, "Shanxi Fenjiu"), recognizable by design, if not by text. The character of Han Sanming is from Shanxi in the film, and he presents these as souvenirs from home. The inclusion of time and region-specific props adds to a sense of realism in the mise-en-scene of *Still Life*.

### 7.4 Connection to Jia Zhangke's general themes

As discussed in the literary review chapter, demolition and consequent dislocation is an important theme in Jia Zhangke's works. As the examples mentioned above attest, this theme is displayed prominently also in the linguistic landscapes of *Still Life*. The use of signs directly connected to dislocation is prominent and deliberate, therefore being a continuation of the work of him and his Urban Generation peers (Braester, 2007; Lu, 2007). As described by Kevin Lee (2001), Jia's characters are frequently at a loss. This can also be seen in *Still Life*. Byrnes (2012) described how in *Still Life* the audience watches the characters looking at

something. The male protagonist, Han Sanming, often seems perplexed, observing things he doesn't seem to quite grasp. In the film, the camera often follows his gaze, sometimes to texts, as seen in Figures 3 and 7. Jason McGrath (2007) and Chris Berry (2022) have noted the contrasting of dreams and reality in Jia Zhangke's films. This is apparent in Figures 3 and 19, where a glossy ad poster conflicts with the reality of *Still Life*'s protagonists. There's a sense of alienation in these images. Alienation in the post-Mao era is a common theme of Jia and his Urban Generation peers (Berry et al., 2022; Zhen, 2007). As seen in the examples, the linguistic landscapes seen in *Still Life* serve Jia Zhangke's general themes observed throughout his work.

## 7.5 Implications

In *Still Life*, director Jia Zhangke demonstrates a sophisticated use of linguistic landscapes in enhancing storytelling. In this he might be unusual, or *Still Life* could simply be an outlier. It would be interesting to see how his other films integrate linguistic landscapes into the story or how they differ in this respect. Because the approach used in this thesis is undoubtedly niche, it's best employed selectively. A linguistic landscape analysis of a fictional film like this can, however, highlight interesting details in the mise-en-scene that other established methods might easily miss, such as the bottles of 诗仙太白 that strengthen the Li Bai connection, and the symbolic use of the blocky inn sign in *Still Life*. Regarding this effort, as Jia Zhangke is one of the leading and most interesting filmmakers working in the world today, an argument could be made that any method that provides some insight into his work is worthwhile.

## 7.6 Limitations

A major challenge of this study was scope. Because this study is multidisciplinary in nature, covering all contributing fields satisfactorily, while keeping the text readable, was a challenge. I tried to focus on the most germane data, because the scope of this thesis is limited. This resulted in some potentially interesting avenues of inquiry being cut short or eliminated. As the focus was on linguistic landscapes that complement the narrative and themes of *Still Life*, some topics, such as a more detailed analysis of the brands appearing in the film, were left unexplored. Other limitations inherent to this type of study are covered in detail in the methodology chapter.

## 8 Conclusion

In this thesis I sought to answer how Jia Zhangke's common themes are manifested in the linguistic landscapes of *Still Life*. The linguistic landscapes seen in the film are very much part of a whole, and therefore an extension of Jia Zhangke's overall artistic vision. The use of text in *Still Life* is, however, distinct and well-thought-out. The linguistic landscapes seen in *Still Life* are part of the storytelling and world-building in the film, as they provide background context and occasionally highlight a thematic point. Sometimes signs are used symbolically, adding more layers to the film.

The methodology applied here could potentially be used to study other films as well. Due to the very specific nature of this approach, new interesting details and patterns can hopefully be revealed and analysed. Besides films, this approach could also be applied to television series, both fictional and not. However, done manually, the amount of work required to get interesting results by applying this methodology at scale is, in all likelihood, high, possibly rendering such efforts unfeasible. It would be interesting to see how AI could be applied in the future to scrape large amounts of linguistic landscape data from films and television shows. In this type of effort, a quantitative approach could yield interesting results. A qualitative approach, as employed here, is probably more suited to smaller-scale efforts, such as analysing a single film. As the field of linguistic landscape studies is growing and evolving fast, it presents all manner of interesting possibilities. One logical future direction is to apply the methodology used here to Jia Zhangke's other films to determine how they connect or contrast to *Still Life*.

The use of text in *Still Life* is deliberate and creative. Linguistic landscapes in the film complement and expand upon the film's themes of demolition, dislocation and alienation. This study demonstrates how a careful examination of the mise-en-scene of a film through the lens of linguistic landscape studies can yield interesting and surprising results.

## References

- Andrews, D. (2012). No Start, No End: Auteurism and the auteur theory. *Film International*, 10(6), 37–55. [https://doi.org/10.1386/fiin.10.6.37\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1386/fiin.10.6.37_1)
- Babineau, D., Concordia University (Montréal, Q., & Mel Hoppenheim School of Cinema. (2003). *Stairs in cinema: A formal and thematic investigation*. WorldCat.
- Ben Refa'el, E., & Ben-Refa'el, M. (2019). *Multiple globalizations: Linguistic landscapes in world-cities*. Brill.
- Ben-Rafael, E., Shohamy, E., Hasan Amara, M., & Trumper-Hecht, N. (2006). Linguistic Landscape as Symbolic Construction of the Public Space: The Case of Israel. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 3(1), 7–30. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710608668383>
- Berry, M., Jia, Z. ke, & Dai, J. H. (2022). *Jia Zhangke on Jia Zhangke*. Duke University Press.
- Bordwell, D., Thompson, K., & Smith, J. (2017). *Film art: An introduction* (Eleven edition, international student edition). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Braester, Y. (2007). Tracing the City's Scars: Demolition and the Limits of the Documentary Impulse in the New Urban Cinema. In Z. Zhang (Ed.), *The Urban Generation* (pp. 161–180). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390008-008>
- Byrnes, C. (2012). Specters of Realism and the Painter's Gaze in Jia Zhangke's 'Still Life'. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 24(2), 52–93.
- Chitwood, A. (2021, January 29). *David Fincher Explains Why He Doesn't Believe in Auteur Theory*. Collider. <https://collider.com/david-fincher-auteur-theory-comments/>
- Coupland, N., & Garrett, P. (2010). Linguistic landscapes, discursive frames and metacultural performance: The case of Welsh Patagonia. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2010(205). <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijsl.2010.037>
- Directed by Jia Zhangke*. (n.d.). The Criterion Channel. Retrieved 19 May 2025, from <https://www.criterionchannel.com/directed-by-jia-zhangke>
- Gorter, D., & Cenoz, J. (2024). *A panorama of linguistic landscape studies*. Multilingual Matters.

- Habermas, J. (2011). *The structural transformation of the public sphere: An inquiry into a category of bourgeois society* (1. publ. in paperback, repr). Polity.
- Harrell, S. (2023). *An ecological history of modern China*. University of Washington Press.
- History of the Venice Film Festival*. (2017, December 7). La Biennale Di Venezia.  
<https://www.labiennale.org/en/history-venice-film-festival>
- Jia, Z. (Director). (2006). *Still Life* [三峡好人] [Video recording]. Xstream Pictures.  
<https://www.blockbuster.dk/fi/movie/san-xia-hao-ren>
- Juxtaposition In Film—A Powerful Tool For Storytelling*. (2024, August 13).  
<https://cinemawavesblog.com/film-blog/juxtaposition-in-film/>
- Kajszczarek, D. (2023). Linguistic landscape in film works and video games. *Homo Ludens*, 1(15), 65–79. <https://doi.org/10.14746/HL.2022.15.4>
- Kallen, J. L. (2010). Changing Landscapes: Language, Space and Policy in the Dublin Linguistic Landscape. In *Semiotic Landscapes: Language, Image, Space* (pp. 41–58).
- Landry, R., & Bourhis, R. Y. (1997). Linguistic Landscape and Ethnolinguistic Vitality: An Empirical Study. *Journal of Language and Social Psychology*, 16(1), 23–49.  
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X970161002>
- Lee, K. (2001, December 29). *Jia Zhangke – Senses of Cinema*.  
<https://www.sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/jia/>
- Leimgruber, J. R. E. (2020). Global multilingualism, local bilingualism, official monolingualism: The linguistic landscape of Montreal’s St. Catherine Street. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 23(6), 708–723. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2017.1401974>
- Liu, J. (2006). The Rhetoric of Local Languages as the Marginal: Chinese Underground and Independent Films by Jia Zhangke and Others. *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture*, 18(2), 163–205.
- Lu, S. H. (2007). Tear Down the City: Reconstructing Urban Space in Contemporary Chinese Popular Cinema and Avant-Garde Art. In Z. Zhang (Ed.), *The Urban Generation* (pp. 137–160). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390008-007>
- Mair, V. H. (2001). *The Columbia history of Chinese literature*. Columbia University press.

- McGrath, J. (2007). The Independent Cinema of Jia Zhangke: From Postsocialist Realism to a Transnational Aesthetic. In Z. Zhang (Ed.), *The Urban Generation* (pp. 81–114). Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822390008-004>
- Mello, C. (2019). *The cinema of Jia Zhangke: Realism and memory in Chinese film*. I.B. Tauris.
- Nokia says Greater China sales grew 39 pct in 2006. (2007, August 9). *Reuters*.  
<https://www.reuters.com/article/business/media-telecom/nokia-says-greater-china-sales-grew-39-pct-in-2006-idUSSHA20164/>
- Pirilä, K., Kivi, E., Hietaranta, J., & Hintikka, H. (2017). *Elävä kuva—Elävä ääni. Otos*. BoD - Books on Demand.
- Puzey, G. (2016). *Linguistic Landscapes* (C. Hough, Ed.). Oxford University Press.  
<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199656431.013.16>
- Segal, G., & Antonio, S. (2021). *Dramatic Effects with a Movie Camera* (1st ed.). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. <https://doi.org/10.5040/9781474285858>
- Shohami, I. G. (with Ben Refa'el, E., & Barni, M.). (2010). *Linguistic Landscape in the City* (1st ed.). Channel View Publications.
- Shohamy, E. (2018). 1. Linguistic Landscape after a Decade: An Overview of Themes, Debates and Future Directions. In M. Pütz & N. Mundt (Eds.), *Expanding the Linguistic Landscape* (pp. 25–37). Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781788922166-004>
- Still Life critic reviews*. (n.d.). Retrieved 6 February 2025, from  
<https://www.metacritic.com/movie/still-life/critic-reviews/>
- Szeto, K.-Y. (2009). A Moist Heart: Love, Politics and China's Neoliberal Transition in the Films of Jia Zhangke. *Visual Anthropology*, 22(2–3), 95–107.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08949460802623515>
- Troyer, R. A., & Szabó, T. P. (2017). Representation and videography in linguistic landscape studies. *Linguistic Landscape. An International Journal*, 3(1), 56–77.  
<https://doi.org/10.1075/ll.3.1.03tro>

- Tufi, S., & Blackwood, R. (2010). Trademarks in the linguistic landscape: Methodological and theoretical challenges in qualifying brand names in the public space. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 7(3), 197–210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790710903568417>
- Wang, Q. (2014). *Memory, Subjectivity and Independent Chinese Cinema*. Edinburgh University Press. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt14brz9z>
- Wang, Y. (2015). Violence, *wuxia*, migrants: Jia Zhangke's cinematic discontent in *A Touch of Sin*. *Journal of Chinese Cinemas*, 9(2), 159–172. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17508061.2015.1020626>
- Wilmsen, B. (2016). After the Deluge: A longitudinal study of resettlement at the Three Gorges Dam, China. *World Development*, 84, 41–54. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.worlddev.2016.04.003>
- Zhen, Z. (Ed.). (2007). *The Urban Generation: Chinese Cinema and Society at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv11smskf>
- 公司简介-重庆诗仙太白酒业有限公司 [Company Profile-Chongqing Shixian Taibai Wine Co., Ltd.]. (n.d.). Retrieved 3 May 2025, from <https://www.shixiantaibai.com/about/3.html>

## Appendix

### Additional Figures



Figure A2. 13:57. Bottle of 诗仙太白 (shīxiān tàibái, "Poetry Immortal Li Bai").



Figure A2. 34:52. Bottle of 诗仙太白 (shīxiān tàibái, "Poetry Immortal Li Bai").



Figure A3. 1:06:06. Bottle of 诗仙太白 (shīxiān tàibái, "Poetry Immortal Li Bai").



Figure A4. 1:23:28. Bottle of 诗仙太白 (shīxiān tàibái, "Poetry Immortal Li Bai").



Figure A5. 1:36:17. Bottle of 诗仙太白 (shīxiān tàibái, "Poetry Immortal Li Bai").



Figure A6. 27:24. 10-yuan bill compared to Kuimen.



Figure A7. 15:07. “烟 Cigarette” superimposed.



Figure A8. 25:03. “酒 Liquor” superimposed.



Figure A9. 1:15:23. "唐 Toffee" superimposed.



Figure A10. 39:02. "三线水位 156.3" on a big sign.



Figure A11. 3:12. “安心” (ānxīn, “at ease, peace of mind”), torn sticker next to Han Sanming.



Figure A12. 29:09. “努力” on a scroll in a demolition worksite.



Figure A13. 1:03:45. Shen Hong next to a poster of a cruise ship, “纵情天”.