

# A Study on the Development and Change Strategies of Domestic Road Films in China

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**Abstract.** The analysis in this paper focuses on the Chinese domestic road movie, a film genre that has a late but promising start in China. The material for Chinese road movies often comes from people's lives, but some trends in recent years have proved that Chinese road movie creators are trying to use road movies to show people's inner desires, which are different from those in the past. The purpose of studying the development and changing strategies of road films is to promote the development of Chinese-made road films in the future and to find breakthroughs for developing Chinese road films in a social environment where pressure is gradually increasing. After introducing the development of Chinese road movies at various stages, based on the status quo of Chinese road movies in the past, the author points out the problems in the development process of Chinese road movies in terms of the solidification of the mode, the mishmash of genres and the spiritual kernel that has been gradually exposed. In the face of this situation, the author makes three suggestions in the light of the spiritual core of Chinese people and the current situation of modern society.

**Keywords:** Road Movies, Localisation, Developmental Reflections.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. Research background

When exploring the genres of Chinese domestic cinema, the road film is a subject that is seldom noticed, but it still occupies a place in the Chinese market with its unique aesthetic value. In May 2023, a Chinese-made road movie named *Godspeed* entered the public eye and took the top spot at the box office during the Labour Day holiday with 531 million yuan [1]. Although the film has many comedic elements, its cast and plot still show that this is a road movie. This achievement proves that the tourism market is recovering after its popularity and shows filmmakers that road movies can be further developed in China. With the development of urban culture and the broadening of the public's definition of travel, road and travel will not only appear as an element in comedies but could become the subject of a successful and lucrative film. As a not-so-new subject, the road movie is not an outdated film theme. As society evolves and changes, there is still plenty of room for road movies to develop.

### 1.2. Literature Review

Hou analyses the narrative style of Chinese road films. In the course of more than two decades of development, Chinese domestic road film narratives have already expressed many clips related to people's daily lives with characteristic character designs, and many classic clips are still enjoyed by people today. However, this author also points out the problems in Chinese road movies, namely, severe homogenization and fewer points of difference between different films. The problem of weak connection to the times also exists and has even become one of the main problems affecting Chinese road movies. Hou points out that in the development of Chinese road movies, the most representative film genres are the road comedy represented by the "Lost" series, the anti-genre dystopian road fable, and the documentary-style literary road movie [2]. On the other hand, Kang's study points out the aesthetic characteristics and audience groups of Chinese road movies and shows readers the existing market for road movies in China. The author uses sufficient data to show the characteristics of modern road movie audiences in China. At the same time, the author incorporates audience motivations to

make specific predictions about future changes in the audience for road movies in China. The author points out that the middle-class perspective will become more critical in the future, and creators should consider the localized characteristics and show more humanistic care and reflection on human life [3]. Du & Liu's study mainly illustrates the commercialization trend of Chinese road movies, reminding creators that they need to pay attention to whether the commercialization of the film deviates from the theme of the road movie itself when exploring human nature [4].

### 1.3. Research Gap

Among the many studies on Chinese domestic road films, most scholars are more concerned with the narrative style, filming techniques, and development history of road films. At the same time, many articles also focus on some directors with solid personal characteristics, summarising the narrative styles of the road movies they made. However, among all the studies on Chinese road films, very few scholars have examined the potential spiritual core and future development direction of Chinese domestic road films. As one of the film genres that used to be popular in the United States in the last century, road movies do not seem mainstream anymore in the 21st century. However, along with the expansion of people's understanding of the ways of traveling, films with road and traveling as the main elements have found the possibility to eliminate the comedy theme. Popular psychology changed with the times, and the underlying spiritual characteristics of instability allowed road films to find new creative space. In this era, the meaning Chinese people give to traveling is entirely different from what it was ten years ago, so the spiritual core of road movies has gradually changed.

### 1.4. Research Framework

Therefore, this paper will explore the problems of Chinese road movies and further explore the development direction of Chinese domestic cinema. Firstly, the current development of road movies will be analyzed, and the author will extract the themes and essential elements of existing Chinese road movies and analyze them. Secondly, the spiritual core of Chinese road movies will be explored. The author will explore why road movies have failed to become mainstream in China, explore the more profound imagination of people towards roads and traveling, and find more creative possibilities. Finally, the main goal will be to predict the future direction of road movies in China.

## 2. Case Description

With the development of the times, traveling by private car or renting a car has become one of the familiar forms of leisure for many Chinese families. This type of travel has at least two essential features that distinguish it from mass tourism: first, the importance of the destination is weakened, more travel time occurs during the journey, and the most crucial travel experience arises from the process of flowing on the road; second, the road space is coexisting with travelers moving in multiple modes of transport, and any one of these modes requires more extended time and more hardship, which does not conform to travel's "fastness" [5]. On this basis, Chinese domestic road films began to receive more and more attention. In 2001, "China's first road film" *Going to the End*, was broadcast, marking the birth of the domestic road film. Since China did not have a car culture similar to that of the United States, the road films of the two countries showed different filming techniques and ideological cores. Compared to the hippie spirit of rebellion conveyed in American road movies influenced by Beat Generation literature, Chinese road movies' "localized" character is relatively apparent. Until 2006, three Chinese road movies, *Lai Boy*, *Aromatic Journey*, and *Falling Leaves, Returning to Their Roots*, were released successively, and these films, which responded to real social problems, won many domestic and international awards and received wide attention from society. Subsequently, a Chinese road movie was released almost every one or two years. *Scary Road Is Fun* in 2015, which combines road, comedy, and thriller elements, is a brave innovation in Chinese road movies. Chinese road movies released after this have placed more emphasis on the display of love and family relationships, with love-themed road movies dominating the market. In the process, some

highly commercial road movies were created. Despite the same elements of rebellion, love, and black humor, the style of Chinese road movies is still closely connected with healing, thought-provoking, and even religious. Unlike the American “self-expression”, the primary purpose of Chinese road movies is “self-discovery” [2]. However, the fact is that Chinese genre cinema as a whole started later than the development of world cinema. Regarding road movies, Western road movies are in their prime, while Chinese road movies are like babies. So far, there is no mature road movie genre in China, and many films called road movies only have some elements of road movies to a large extent, but not the systematic pattern of mature genre films.

### 3. Analysis on the Problem

#### 3.1. The Evolution of Road Movie

##### 3.1.1 The Starting stage after reform and opening up

After the reform and opening up, Chinese people’s economic conditions gradually improved. Chinese society gradually began to come into contact with the culture and films from different countries and regions. Road movies, popular in the United States in the 1970s, were introduced to China then, but they were not widely spread in the still-wealthy Chinese society. After nearly three decades of development, the Chinese people’s economic power has gradually become able to support the enjoyment of the art of cinema. Under the open social environment, the film *Going to the End*, China’s first road movie, entered the public eye in 2001. However, the economic conditions of Chinese society at the time were vastly different from those of the United States, and both the public and the media questioned the film for its scattered plot, inappropriate use of narrative devices, and questionable choice of scenes. Nonetheless, this film of love, adventure, and black humor marks the beginning of the Chinese road movie.

##### 3.1.2 Attempts at localisation

At this stage, Chinese road movies preferred to be based on concerning news events. The transition from imitation to the new generation of Chinese road movies is marked by the films *Falling Leaves*, *Returning to Their Roots*, and *People Mountain, People Sea*, both based on the films of the time. Both films were based on news events of the time and caused a massive reaction among the people. *Falling Leaves*, *Returning to Their Roots* tells the story of a migrant worker who returns to his hometown to bury the body of a fellow worker who died overseas, while *People Mountain, People Sea* tells the story of a man who loses his little brother and travels across northern China in search of the murderer. The contradictions of society and the characters’ struggles are shown in the films, and the deep emotions embedded in the films make them famous. The most significant difference between these films and American road movies is their unique local flavor, and many of the choices made by the protagonists reflect a unique part of the Chinese mindset. Road movies from this period were still immature, with long sequences and plots that made it difficult for the audience to appreciate the film’s beauty but focused more on the protagonist’s suffering. Sincere and deep feelings brought critical acclaim to the road movies of this era, but they became outdated and challenging to be appreciated by people in modern society.

##### 3.1.3 Commercialisation in recent years

With the richness of people’s entertainment, road movies gradually stepped into commercial development after 2010. Elements such as road and traveling have gradually become an element that is widely added to the comedy. Many harmonic stars starred in road movies to make more people aware of road trips. *Lost on Journey* uses the “Travel in Spring Festival” to tell all kinds of laughs during the journey, and the main character’s experience makes people laugh. However, the film does not go deeper into the perspective of migrant workers to show their lives but only mentions the topic of unpaid wages. At the same time, the end of the story is also faint, making it difficult for the film to rise to the spiritual level of love and bonding. *Breakup Buddies* is a more successful case, a road film about love and healing. Although this literary-style film did not get a high box office compared to the commercial road movies of the same generation, the relationship between the two protagonists

is fully shown in one film, and the way the two narratives are shot in parallel has also made the film highly rated. The film's narrative is full of tense atmosphere, and the complex psychological activities of the two protagonists are perfectly displayed. This is an innovation in narrative mode, and this film is also the starting point of the third branch of Chinese road movies beyond actual events and comedy.

### **3.2. Problems in the Development of Road Cinema**

#### **3.2.1 Single style: Comedies far outnumber other categories**

In recent years, most domestic road movies have added comedic elements because the more entertaining films are easy to be liked by the audience, but the pompousness and sensationalism of the entertainment elements make the core values conveyed by the films deviate. In recent years, many road movies have borrowed the elements of road and travel to promote their films. However, their essence is still comedy films and road trips are just a means to show the core of comedy, which is essentially detached from the spiritual core of road movies. The *Lost* series and *Breakup Buddies* use self-deprecating language and pompous gestures to add comedy to their films, but at the same time, they exaggerate some of the plots. Many of the hilarious episodes in *Lost on Journey* are so exaggerated that the audience only remembers the absurd life of the main character and mistakes the road movie for a comedy film.

#### **3.2.2 Mixture of genres: too many combined elements**

Combining different elements is an innovation that can increase the audience group of the film and let more people find their own touching while watching the film. However, too many elements can lead to a lack of clarity in the theme. On the one hand, mixing too many elements that cater to the audience's preferences can reduce the gap between different films, making it difficult for creators to create unique works. On the other hand, showing too many absurd elements simultaneously makes Chinese road movies lose the role of responding to social reality. Too many elements make it difficult for the audience to think about the objective social reality but rather indulge in the momentary enjoyment provided by the film [4].

The lack of moving images in Chinese road movies has replaced the existentialist spiritual core of Western Road movies [6]. The emphasis on characters and internal space in Chinese road movies results from combining too many elements, and external space, which is quite essential for road movies, gives way to other elements. Excellent road films should not be a mishmash of elements but should convey profound ideas for the audience to reflect on after watching the film.

#### **3.2.3 Lack of thematic depth: failure to explore the spiritual dimension**

Under the commercialization background, many road movies with literary style or religious characteristics have not attracted enough attention because reflecting on a "sense of belonging" and "loss" in road movies often takes the audience a lot of energy and time. The audience more readily accepts sensual pleasures than deep thoughts. In the reality of increasing social pressure, more and more viewers prefer lighter and more lively film themes rather than serious thinking in the cinema. *No Man's Land* focuses on lap dances, and *Lost on Journey*, with its many Internet-originated lines, shows a shift in the film's focus. Character growth and change should be portrayed more in-depth because viewers tend to overlook the contradictory nature of road movies themselves. From the beginning, road movies mirror American youth's loss, loneliness, resentment, rebellion, and deformed lifestyle [4]. In China, during the process of localization of road movies, creators should pay attention to the display and exploration of human nature in road movies.

## **4. Suggestions**

### **4.1. Controlling the Commercialization of Road Movies**

Controlling the commercialization of road movies is an essential suggestion, but it is challenging to do so. Creators often blend multiple elements to gain more viewers, so the road movie concept is often tampered with in too many creative elements. A film can combine comedy, road, romance, crime, etc [3]. Some Chinese filmmakers have made brave attempts in this area, and Tibetan director

and writer Pema Tseden is one of them. Most of his road films are related to the Tibetan people and Tibet, telling stories belonging to the Tibetan people from a unique perspective. Physical landscaping is emphasized in his films, as is the development and change of his protagonists [7]. Unlike many commercialized films shot in Tibet with celebrities, in Pema Tseden's films, the region's authentic culture and Tibetan identity capture people's attention without the need for emphasis or propaganda.

#### 4.2. Enriching Character Personalities and Showing Localised Characteristics

In the development of Chinese road movies, the portrayal of protagonists is a topic worth discussing. Based on the characteristics of the Chinese narrative, the end of the film always makes all the characters happy. When choosing protagonists, directors tend to favor characters with strong local characteristics. Young people from small towns, migrant workers entering big cities, and young people returning to their hometowns can all be the protagonists portrayed in Chinese road movies. Road movies are inherently wandering, leaving one's residence and pursuing freedom, but due to the traditional Chinese emphasis on home, the end of the story is often related to one's hometown. Unlike the American road movie's emphasis on family, the Chinese often place more importance on a symbolic place to hold their emotions. Therefore, in *Falling Leaves, Returning to Their Roots*, the protagonist, who is a migrant worker in the city, must return to his hometown with the dead body of his workmate, and the protagonist, who is in *The Middle of The Road*, must return to his hometown to be reunited with his family during the Chinese New Year. On a spiritual level, the purpose of the protagonists of Chinese road movies embarking on a journey often also includes finding peace of mind on the road. During the journey, some protagonists improve their relationships with their families, while others face their sins head-on. The purpose of the protagonist embarking on a journey in a Chinese road movie is actually to return to the place of departure, to a state of purity. This is the most unique thing that distinguishes the spiritual core of Chinese road movies from those of other countries [5].

However, with the development of the times, road trips have gradually developed another purpose different from "returning home", namely "escaping from life". With the development of society, the discourse of Chinese cinema is tilting towards the middle class. The high pressure of urban life has prompted people to escape for a limited time to pursue freedom. Chinese road trips tend to last between two days and two weeks, and although the traveler knows that life will eventually get back on track, the point of the journey is to pursue the sense of relaxation that comes with a brief escape from life. It is precisely because the audience knows how the story will end that the freedom of the journey is desired all the more [8]. As one of the trends for the future development of Chinese road movies, creators can put more thought into the design of protagonists and plots, get rid of the stereotype that Chinese road movies can only happen to characters with local characteristics, and create more excellent localized works with humanistic care which can reflect the times and people's psychology in the future.

#### 4.3. Enhance the Expression of Humanistic Care and Emotional Core

The elements that win a good reputation are apparent in the development of Chinese road movies. Apart from commercial marketing gimmicks, what attracts audiences the most is often the part of the road movie closely connected to the people's real lives and reflections on life. *Crossing The Border-Zhaoguan*, shot in 2020, is a rare Chinese rural road movie to be seen in China. The characters speak in Henan dialect, and the main characters, a seventy-year-old man and a seven-year-old child, embark on a journey together to visit the older man's sick friend. In China, where most children are raised by their grandparents rather than their parents at a young age, this plot and character design struck an emotional chord with almost all viewers. The Chinese journey away is always a journey of healing and return, which differs from the Western far-flung journey of rebellion and freedom [9]. In Chinese road movies, the journey is an essential part of the character's growth, and this tendency is influenced by the traditional Chinese "happy ending". For example, the protagonist of *Turning Mountains* pursues his goal in the midst of difficulties and dangers, the protagonist of *Breakup Buddies* finally

finds growth and liberation in his journey, and the *Old Dog* ponders the invasion of traditions by modern civilization in the highland region. All of these stories come to a thought-provoking conclusion. The endings of these stories may not be perfect, but they all reach a self-reconciliation of the protagonist's mind, expanding the space for the audience to think deeply [10].

## 5. Conclusion

### 5.1. Key Findings

In the course of the development of modern Chinese cinema, road films have occupied an important position among many film genres with their unique narrative and aesthetic characteristics. About half a century has passed since the birth of road movies. However, compared with the mature and rich character design and connotation expression of American road movies, Chinese road movies are still developing. Chinese road movies show strong localized characteristics in the development process, and there is still much room for improvement regarding storyline design and emotional transmission. With the development of the times, Chinese road movies present richer connotations and humanistic concerns. Cinema has the nature of displaying the characteristics of the times, and the protagonists and plot design of road movies have already shown such changing characteristics over the past two decades of development. Just as the theme of road movies always finds relief and answers for the protagonist, Chinese road movies have also found their spiritual core that is different from that of American road movies in continuous development and change.

### 5.2. Research Significance

This article summarises the achievements of Chinese road movies in the past twenty years, showing the parts of Chinese road movies that still have room for improvement, and proposes corresponding solutions. There is still room for the development and advancement of road movies in China, but their spiritual core will be different from before. Nonetheless, the representative vernacular character of Chinese road movies remains unchanged. This essay explains the reasons that lead to the problem and tries to make suggestions. Road films' unique narrative style and spiritual freedom-seeking qualities will achieve even greater success in a technologically advancing but stressful Chinese society.

### 5.3. Limitations

In the process of writing this article, fewer primary data was used, and more attention was paid to the artistic and spiritual aspects of Chinese road films. In the future, the author will use more data and tables to show the development and change of Chinese road films and to show the process and development trend of Chinese road films more intuitively.

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