Reframing the Chinese Road Movie: Genre Definition, Social Context, and Localisation within Global Cinema

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Abstract

This paper provides a systematic review of academic controversies surrounding the definition and theoretical territory of the Chinese Road Movie. Previous research has been predominantly informed by an American-centric perspective, which focuses on mobility, psychological transformation, and the return to mainstream values. However, it is argued that a new definition of the Chinese Road Movie can be based on journey space and its class background. This definition illuminates the interaction between physical mobility, spatial process, and identity reconstruction. This paper argues that the Chinese Road Movie, rather than functioning as a branch of the American model, emerges locally as a revision of the global tradition. It develops cultural logics and visual practices unique to contemporary Chinese society. Additionally, its mixed-class composition makes it an instrumental movie genre for examining diverse Chinese masculinities in the contemporary era.

Keywords: Chinese Road Movie, Global Road Movie, Localisation, Genre Definition, Journey Space

Introduction

The Road Movie, as an independent cinematic genre, formally originated in the United States during the 1960s, epitomised by Dennis Hopper's *Easy Rider* (1969) (Corrigan, 1991). In China, the genre was introduced with Shi Runjiu's *All the Way* (2001), which marked its formal entry into the Chinese cinematic landscape (Yu, 2002). Rather than merely imitating the Western model, Chinese road movies have evolved in response to the dramatic social transformations of post-1990s China, marked by uneven modernisation and reconfigured class identities. The study of the specificity of the Chinese Road Movie is therefore of considerable significance, as it not only articulates the cultural negotiations between global cinematic forms and local realities, but also reveals how class, identity, location, and mobility are being reconfigured in contemporary Chinese cinema under the conditions of globalisation.

Early examples such as *Passages* (dir. Yang Chao, 2004), *The Red Awn* (dir. Cai Shangjun, 2007), and *Getting Home* (dir. Zhang Yang, 2006) inherited the realist aesthetics that the Sixth Generation filmmakers developed in their arthouse works. These road movie works employ the journey motif to visualise the precarious survival of lower-class individuals, such as migrant workers and small-town youth, thereby functioning as cinematic articulations of social critique (Xu, 2014). Entering the 2010s, the genre gradually shifted towards the commercial mainstream with *Lost on Journey* (dir. Ye Weimin, 2010), whose popular success redefined the road movie narrative as a comedic and reconciliatory mode. While these films continue to utilise the journey as a metaphor for transformation, they typically centre on urban class protagonists whose travels become ritualised processes of self-redemption and moral realignment within the logic of market modernity, revealing the genre's adaptation to consumer culture and neoliberal ethics (D. Li, 2013; Yao, 2015).

In recent years, a new generation of filmmakers, including Bi Gan, Huo Meng, and Pema Tseden, has revitalised the genre by infusing it with poetic realism, local spatial aesthetics, and philosophical introspection (B. Li, 2020; Pecic, 2022). Their films reconfigure the journey as an inner exploration rather than a purely physical passage. Through the use of slow tempo, regional dialects, and meditative landscapes, these directors depart from the market-oriented logic of commercial cinema and foreground marginal identities, local languages, and non-urban spaces as key coordinates of narrative meaning. These changes have significant implications for scholars, filmmakers, and cultural policymakers, as they shed light on how local Chinese cinema is reshaping artistic expression and cultural imagination in contemporary China. Consequently, scholars have coined new conceptual terms such as the "journey film" (Berry, 2016), "wandering narrative" (B. Li, 2020), "healing-themed journey film" (B. Li, 2013), and the "travel movie" (Y. Li, 2020) to describe the increasing diversity and hybridity of Chinese cinematic practices within the broader framework of Chinese Road Movie.

However, despite these theoretical expansions, the Chinese Road Movie remains conceptually unsettled. As Li Bin previously observed, the central challenge in the field of Chinese road movie studies lies in the ambiguity of definition (B. Li, 2013). While the proliferation of diverse scholarly perspectives is both valuable and inevitable, the fundamental question of what qualifies as a Chinese Road Movie and what does not remains unresolved. In the subsequent study, this definitional uncertainty may produce two contrasting consequences. On one hand, films that clearly employ the narrative structure of the journey and depict spatial mobility, such as *Aiqing a, ni xing shenme*? (dir. Yan Bili, 1980), *Woman, Taxi, Woman* (dir. Wang Junzheng, 1991), and *Crosscurrent* (dir. Yang Chao, 2016) are often excluded from this movie genre scope. On the other hand, films lacking the essential traits of the genre are sometimes mistakenly included, leading to analytical inconsistency and methodological confusion. For instance, Li Bin's monograph identifies approximately fifty Chinese road movies (B. Li, 2020), whereas later MA theses examine only around thirty (Lu, 2012; Peng, 2015). These differences reveal the absence of a coherent framework for defining Chinese film genres. They also highlight the urgent need for an indigenous typology grounded in local cultural and industrial contexts. Without such a framework, both scholarship and creative practice risk relying on externally derived concepts that fail to capture the specificities of Chinese cinematic modernity.

Given these definitional tensions, a comprehensive literature review of the origins of the genre is essential. Establishing a coherent, context-sensitive framework for defining the Chinese road movie is not only an issue of analytical precision but also a step toward the autonomous theorisation of Chinese film genres.

The study draws on Duarte and Corrigan's (2018) concept of the Global Road Movie, which provides a new theoretical reference point for redefining the Chinese Road Movie. Within this globalised theoretical framework, the Chinese Road Movie should not be regarded as a derivative of the Western model but as a locally negotiated cinematic form that engages in a dynamic dialogue with the global road movie tradition under specific socio-cultural conditions.

Accordingly, this study poses the following core questions: Within the dual context of China's post-1990s social transformation and the theoretical framework of the global road movie, how can the definitional scope and theoretical boundaries of the Chinese Road Movie be more precisely articulated? Amid multiple, overlapping, and even conflicting interpretations, how might a more explanatory and locally adaptive analytical framework be constructed to advance the autonomous and systematic development of Chinese genre theory?

By doing so, this study contributes significantly both theoretically and practically. Specifically, it offers a theoretically coherent and context-sensitive framework that will expand the global intellectual discussion of film genres from the Chinese perspective. Practically, it will provide analytical methods for filmmakers and film critics to interpret better, categorise, and create road movies in China's rapidly expanding film industry.

Global Tradition and Local Context: The Debate over the Definition of the Chinese Road Movie

In the 1990s, American scholar Corrigan offered one of the earliest systematic definitions and typological analyses of the genre in his influential book *A Cinema Without Walls: Movies and Culture after Vietnam* (Corrigan, 1991). In the key chapter "*Genre, Gender and Hysteria: The Road Movie in Outer Space*," Corrigan defined the Road Movie as the "movies about cars, trucks, motorcycles, or some other motoring soul-descendant of the nineteenth-century train" (Corrigan, 1991, p. 144). This definition highlights the centrality of modern mechanical mobility in constructing the genre convention, distinguishing it from other cinematic forms.

Yu, a Chinese scholar, was the first to introduce the American concept of the Road Movie into the context of Chinese cinema and film studies (Yu, 2002). Since then, under the broader framework of movie genre localisation, scholars have conducted multi-dimensional explorations of this concept, seeking to define what constitutes a distinctly Chinese version of the road movie. Currently, three major analytical approaches have emerged in academic discourse. Building on a review of these existing studies, this paper engages in a critical discussion that combines theoretical reflection with close analysis of representative film texts.

Modern Mobility
The dominant American approach is the first, which focuses on modern mobility as its key analytical concept. In this frame, the Road Movie is thought to be built upon the space

triad: road-landscape-modern vehicle, which describes a two-fold path of transit, both geographical and psychological. Modern means of transportation, such as cars and motorcycles, are interpreted as the genre's defining conventions, symbolising not only speed and mobility but also freedom and rebellion. In this sense, it embodies the desires and psychological projections of the middle class (Hunt, 2020; Shao & Fang, 2006). Such a definitional tradition reflects the success of American scholarship in establishing the genre's legitimacy within the broader sociological terrain of film studies. The act of travelling in the road movie thus becomes a metaphor for urban individual self-realisation within capitalist modernity.

This reading highlights a bourgeois, taste-centred conception of mobility. However, it becomes analytically limiting when applied to China's premodern or transitional socio-economic contexts, as it neglects the historical and structural conditions that restrict the mobility of most Chinese social groups. As Yao (2015) demonstrates in his research on the Chinese road film, the assumption of Western liberal subjectivity often turns the viewing of Chinese road films into a form of spectatorship that consumes natural landscapes as visual pleasure and metropolitan escape.

Conversely, in Chinese arthouse road films, the mobility and the landscape are not composed to be consumed but rather felt as the pain of the marginalised class, standing in stark contrast to the spectacle of social inequity. In other words, the road trip is no longer a figure of self-liberation; instead, it becomes an encounter with the struggle for survival. For example, in *People Mountain People Sea* (dir. Cai Shangjun, 2012), the protagonist, Lao Tie, is a migrant worker seeking revenge for his brother's death. His journey through desolate mountain roads and abandoned mining sites reveals a hauntographic geography of corruption, violence, and systemic decay. For Lao Tie, movement is not an expression of voluntaristic freedom but a mobility compelled by vengeance which marked by a persistent sense of displacement and unbelonging. The film's landscape displaces the open road as a tactile sense of deprivation and alienation.

In this sense, the road becomes a site of discontinuity, institutional coercion, and class dislocation. Consequently, when interpreted solely through the lens of Western mobility mode, Chinese road cinema is often reduced to formalised narratives of movement, while its social critique and class implications are largely overlooked.

Second, this mobility-oriented perspective often perpetuates a kind of "automobility centrism," in which the modern car functions as both a narrative engine and an ideological touchstone. Such an approach risks overlooking the classed social histories that underpin the heterogeneity of mobility in Chinese road cinema.

In the socio-historical context of 1990s China, particularly in rural and semi-urban areas, journeys frequently take place in regions where modern transportation infrastructures remain underdeveloped. Consequently, Chinese road films often feature alternative vehicles: harvesters, tricycles, boats, bicycles, and even walking, each carrying distinct social and spatial meanings. This plurality of movements embodies a heterogeneity and sociality of mobility that stands in stark contrast to the automobile-centred landscapes of Western road movies and their middle-class individualism.

In early arthouse works such as *Passages* (dir. Yang Chao, 2004) and *The Red Awn* (dir. Cai Shangjun, 2007), mobility is represented through non-automotive means of transportation. *Passages* follows two small-town youths from Anhui province in the 1990s whose thwarted pursuits of education, employment, and love culminate in disillusionment and identity drift. Both their geographical movement and their precarious sense of mobility are centred on the bicycle. In *The Red Awn*, by contrast, a rural father who has worked as a migrant labourer for nearly two decades travels with his estranged son on a combine harvester. Here, the harvester does not signify mechanical progress; rather, it functions both as an instrument of livelihood and as a site of generational tension.

However, these kinds of films are often overlooked by Chinese film critics when discussing the Chinese road movie, primarily because they deviate from the bourgeois aesthetics and mobility conventions associated with the American road movie genre. Some scholars even prefer to use the term *gonglu dianying ticai* (rural-themed road type) rather than "road movie genre" to account for these deviations (Rao & Chen, 2008). This categorisation inadvertently excludes such works from the corpus of early Chinese arthouse road movies.

Nevertheless, it is precisely this exclusion that exposes the epistemic limits of applying the American model to the Chinese context. As this study argues, such exclusion reveals the cultural and methodological constraints of the Modern Mobility framework. It shows that such unexamined definitions reinforce a Western-centred norm of mobility. In this norm, narrative form is tied exclusively to automobility and to the urban middle class. To understand Chinese road cinema more fully, the automobile must be decentred from the genre's definition. Only then can mobility be understood as a historically situated negotiation among modernisation, social inequality, and embodied experience.

Journey narrative

The second analytical approach is grounded in the journey narrative framework. In Chinese film scholarship, the arthouse road movie is often referred to as the "*lücheng pian*" (journey film). Studies of ethnic-minority road cinemas, particularly those set in Tibetan regions, have further developed this analytical model. For example, Berry (2016) and Li Yijun (2020) use the term "journey film" to describe road movies that foreground the protagonist's internal journey. They interpret the hero's movement and stillness as allegories of identity searching, spiritual reflection, and cultural dislocation. In *The Search* (dir. Pema Tseden, 2009) and *Tharlo* (dir. Pema Tseden, 2015), the journey is no longer a mere act of physical travel. Instead, it becomes a psychological space filled with ambivalence and cultural negotiation. This study argues that this analytical approach reorients the focus of the road movie toward its transformative function. It highlights travel, change, and self-discovery as the genre's central thematic concerns. By doing so, it transcends earlier definitions that relied too heavily on surface elements such as motor vehicles, asphalt roads, or picturesque landscapes as the key markers of the road-movie form.

However, this study argues that the "inner journey" is not an exclusive principle of the road movie. Instead, it represents a universal narratological imperative that underlies all storytelling.

As with the primacy of psychological characterisation in plot construction, there is a long tradition that recognises transformation as an inherent narrative motif. This recognition can be traced to classical narrative theories. Examples include McKee's (1997) notion of the "character arc," Vogler's (2007) adaptation of Campbell's "hero's journey," and Schmidt's (2005) typology of "gendered mythic structures," all of which emphasise transformation as the driving force of narrative form. However, if the road movie were reduced solely to a story of inward transformation, it would risk losing its distinct visual convention system.

In the framework of Chinese cinema, the journey narrative becomes especially significant when grounded in specific material, social, and spatial contexts. *The Search* (dir. Pema Tseden, 2009), for instance, unfolds across the landscapes of *Qinghai* and *Tibet*. The film follows a director travelling through the region in search of actors for a traditional Tibetan opera. As the journey unfolds, it reveals the tensions between modernisation and cultural continuity, reflecting on Tibetan identity caught in transition under state modernity. Similarly, *Tharlo* (dir. Pema Tseden, 2015) tells the story of a shepherd who travels to town to obtain an identity card, only to become entangled in emotional and moral confusion. His movement between urban temptation and rural belonging, captured through Pema Tseden's stark black-and-white cinematography, expresses a dual displacement that is both psychological and existential. This internal fracture mirrors the broader contradictions of China's own modernisation process.

Understood in this way, while the concept of the journey film helps to explain modes of identity transformation, an excessive focus on narrative teleology risks neglecting the visual, spatial, and structural conventions that define the road movie as a genre. More importantly, such a reduction also obscures the social conflicts, power asymmetries, and class tensions that constitute the very foundation of Chinese road cinema as a form of cultural and ideological critique.

Ideological Function

A third analytical perspective focuses on value expression, linking the concept of the Road Movie to its ideological function. Genre theorist Schatz (1981) argues that what defines a genre is not only its recurring narrative patterns but also the social values and ideological conflicts it conveys. From this perspective, film genres operate as cultural mediators that symbolically reconcile social contradictions and reproduce dominant moral orders. Building on this theoretical orientation, Chinese scholars studying the commercial road movie have increasingly adopted a value-oriented critical model. This approach situates the Chinese road movie within the affective and moral economy of contemporary urban life.

One of the most frequently cited concepts is Li Bin's notion of the "healing-themed journey," later expanded by subsequent scholars (Cao et al., 2015; B. Li, 2013; Yao, 2015). According to this model, such films typically centre on urban middle-class men who, following emotional collapse or ethical alienation, embark on journeys of self-repair and moral renewal. These journeys are expressed through physical travel, culminating in the restoration of Confucian virtues such as family cohesion, moral duty, and social harmony. In this sense, road movies function as instruments of cultural negotiation, aligning their narrative trajectories with the ethical salvation of middle-class modernity. The therapeutic logic of this approach is exemplified in two representative films, *Lost in Thailand* (2012) and *Breakup Buddies* (2014).

Both reconfigure the uncertainties of market modernity into narratives of emotional recovery and moral healing.

In reality, while value expression forms the ideological core of genre construction, Schatz also argues that formal and visual conventions remain indispensable to defining its boundaries(Schatz, 1981). For example, both detective films and Westerns articulate the triumph of order over chaos. However, their spatial vocabularies, the shadowed metropolis versus the desolate frontier, define their generic difference.

Similarly, in the context of Chinese road movies, form and space are not passive aesthetic containers but active signifiers of ideology. *Crosscurrent* (dir. Yang Chao, 2016) provides a vivid example. The film reconfigures the road movie tradition within a distinctly Chinese visual and poetic idiom. Combining realism and mysticism, it follows Gao Chun, a young cargo-ship captain from a small town who sails along the Yangtze. His voyage intertwines smuggling, memory, and metaphysical longing. The river and the ship serve as the film's central visual anchors, blending motifs of trade, history, and spiritual desire. They also reflect the protagonist's embeddedness in China's economic and cultural hierarchies. Replacing the car and highway of the Western model, these images produce a fluid and culturally resonant aesthetic of mobility, one that evokes both pre-modern continuity and modern dislocation.

While an ideological approach offers valuable insights into the moral and affective dimensions of genre, excessive emphasis on ideology can obscure the textual innovations and aesthetic distinctiveness of local cinematic practices. Ultimately, reducing the Chinese road movie to a homogenised ideological framework may overlook what truly sustains its vitality: cross-cultural hybridity, aesthetic experimentation, and the tension between global modernity and local cultural negotiation. To grasp the broader implications of the Chinese road movie, discursive analysis of values must therefore be integrated with formalist approaches.

Reconstructing the Road Movie Genre: A Framework Centred on "Journey Space"
In China's socio-historical context since the 1990s, pre-modern social structures have coexisted with multiple forms of mobility, shaping both the visual aesthetics and narrative logic of its road cinema. Hence, it is essential to develop a localised conceptual framework that captures the distinctiveness of the Chinese road movie in relation to its Western predecessors.

As Zhang (2024) observes, Chinese road movies are typically set across diverse spatial environments, including rural regions, river networks, grasslands, and ethnic-minority areas, where their narratives unfold across different layers of history and cross-cultural exchange. The modes of mobility also differ from those in Western road movies: walking, boats, tractors, and tricycles frequently replace automobiles as primary means of travel. This diversity not only reflects China's infrastructural realities but also encodes the social semiotics of class and geography, through which cinematic mobility becomes a negotiation between modernity and marginality.

Similarly, Lü (2012) and Peng (2015) argue that, unlike Western road movies, which primarily portray the mobility of the middle class, Chinese road films encompass a broader

social spectrum. On the one hand, they document the migration, labour, and precarity of lower-class groups navigating economic upheavals; on the other, they depict the self-reflection and ethical reorientation of urban middle-class men confronting emotional and moral crises through travel. Taken together, these two trajectories demonstrate the genre's capacity to traverse diverse social and spatial terrains, positioning mobility as a mirror of China's stratified modernity.

In this way, the Chinese Road Movie should not be simplistically folded into a single narrative, whether that of middle-class recovery or Western-style adventure. Instead, it serves as a site of identity negotiation, overlaying alternative spirituality with spatial and class dynamics whose power is deeply rooted in the local. This genre constructs individuals from different social strata who reflect questions of identity, morality, and belonging amid China's rapid social transformation. Thus, Chinese road cinema both continues and pluralises the global road movie tradition by offering a more heterogeneous vision of mobility, one that is simultaneously spatial, class-based, and ethical.

Furthermore, it is essential to define the Chinese Road Movie within the tripartite power structure of filmmaking, conventionally termed *leixing sanfen*, the "tripartite ontological division", by Chinese film scholars. This framework encompasses the political, commercial, and artistic dimensions that regulate production, distribution, and critical discourse (Hao, 2011; Wang, 2007; Wang, 2011). These tripartite domains are not discrete; instead, they intersect and compete within the same industrial space. In other words, even within a single movie genre, divergent discursive logics, state ideology, market imperatives, and artistic exploration operate simultaneously, producing political and aesthetic tensions that shape the meaning of cinematic texts. Therefore, interpreting Chinese Road Movie solely through the lens of urban middle-class ideology risks undermining its heterogeneity and obscuring the genre's culturally specific complexity.

Especially within arthouse road trips, the journey rarely culminates in reconciliation, closure, or "return." Instead, protagonists are confronted with irretrievable loss, moral ambiguity, or hope disintegration. They inhabit fragmented landscapes and marginalised bodies, subverting the wishful optimism and ethical concord that typify the commercial "healing-theme journey," which envisions a harmonious resolution at its end (Cao et al., 2015; Li, 2013; Yao, 2015).

Since the American-centric approach fails to account for the local histories, cultural traditions, and geopolitical conditions that shape non-Western cinemas, it is essential to distinguish American road films from those produced in China. As Laderman (2019) observes, the second wave of road-movie scholarship seeks to recognise distinctive cinematic journeys beyond the American framework. Especially in the Chinese context, where mobility is intertwined with state regulation, ethnic diversity, and uneven modernisation, the road movie develops its own historical and aesthetic logics that cannot be subsumed under Western models. Recognising this difference is crucial for constructing a genuinely localised theory of the Chinese Road Movie.

Berry's (2016) study of the Tibetan road movie also further challenges this American-centrism, demonstrating that applying the American paradigm as a universal standard is both

methodologically reductive and culturally inadequate. Building on this de-centred perspective, Corrigan and Duarte (2018), in their book *The Global Road Movie: Alternative Journeys around the World,* identify three interrelated features that define the road movie in its global permutations. First, the genre continually interrogates subjectivity and identity. Second, it constructs mobile spaces and dynamic landscapes. Third, it develops a visual system of movement articulated through vehicles, roads, and transitional imagery. Together, these features offer a flexible yet coherent framework for analysing road movies beyond the Western canon, enabling the recognition of multiple regional and cultural articulations of cinematic mobility. This global framework challenges the presumed American monopoly over the genre's definition and provides both a theoretical foundation for cross-cultural comparison and the conceptual elasticity necessary to account for regional variations. Accordingly, this study argues that the definition of the Chinese road movie should be understood within, and in dialogue with, the broader framework of the global road movie.

Firstly, the Road Movie, as a cinematic mode characterised by transnational circulation and cultural adaptability, has proliferated across multiple regional variants in different historical and thematic contexts, while remaining anchored in a recognisable set of core conventions. As illustrated by Berry's (2016) study of Tibetan road cinema, Corrigan and Duarte's (2018) analyses of European, Australian, and African examples, and Li Bin's (2015) distinction between the American "anti-genre" road film and the Chinese "healing-themed journey film," these subtypes collectively reveal a structurally coherent genre, one organised around the road, the act of travel, the way of transportation and the transformation of character. This structural composition distinguishes the road movie from other action-based genres, such as war or crime films that prioritise external conflict, and from emotion-centred genres, such as romance or melodrama, which foreground emotional unity.

Secondly, any definition of the Chinese Road Movie must foreground the thematic centrality of personal identity formation and class-space background. Both Schatz's (1981) emphasis on ideological value and Li Bin's (2013) focus on the moral orientation of Chinese road films indicate that the articulation of identity is fundamental to genre construction. From a global perspective, the pursuit of identity through alternative spaces constitutes the core narrative engine of the road movie. Across different national contexts, this theme is continually adapted to local ideological, cultural, and spatial conditions. Protagonists depart from familiar social orders and embark on journeys that enable them to question, transform, or resist dominant values. Through such movements, they ultimately reconstruct their sense of self —whether through affirmation, reconciliation, or tragedy —revealing how the road movie transforms spatial mobility into an allegory of moral and existential renewal.

At the visual level, the Chinese Road Movie constructs a dynamic interplay among space, mobility, and the body. Unlike genres driven primarily by physical confrontation or emotional exchange, its visual grammar is shaped by corporeal movement and the psychological flow generated through motion and spatial transition. In the Chinese context, the nation's vast and uneven geography, spanning rural hinterlands, riverine networks, highland plateaus, and ethnic-minority regions, becomes a key site where cinematic mobility intersects with bodily diversity. The vehicles of travel, ranging from trains, tricycles, tractors, and harvesters to simple acts of walking, extend the spectrum of bodily movement beyond the automobile, transforming mobility into a culturally and class-inflected visual language. Therefore, any

redefinition of the Chinese Road Movie must decisively move beyond automobility-centrism, taking plural forms of bodily mobility and heterogeneous spatiality as its core principles of genre identification.

In general, the Chinese Road Movie should not be confined to a single medium (the car), a fixed spatial trajectory (the highway), or one dominant motif (the family return). Instead, it should be understood across three interrelated dimensions: generic convention, cultural ethos, and social structure. As a local film form within the global cinematic tradition, the Chinese Road Movie inherits the universal narrative engine of identity, vehicle, and movement through journey, while generating specific class representations, modes of transport, and spatial configurations unique to contemporary China. Accordingly, the Chinese Road Movie can be defined as a cinematic articulation of journey space, where experience is negotiated both bodily and psychologically in response to geographic and social transformation. Distinct from other genres, it employs the symbolic meanings of travel and mobility to navigate unknown worlds, following the individual's reconstitution of self under conditions of displacement and change.

Conclusion

Based on a systematic review of scholarly debates on the Chinese road movie, this article has identified a central dilemma facing this genre: the over-ambiguity of its definition and genre boundaries, along with an over-reliance on American-centred paradigms. This study has argued that within the global tradition of the road movie, the Chinese Road Movie should be defined as a genre focused on journey space, emphasising the mobilisation of diverse social classes and identity transformation as its core narrative mechanisms. More specifically, the Chinese Road Movie does not emerge as a derivative of the American model but as a local variant within the Global Road Movie network. This genre adds a unique visual logic and theoretical significance to global cinema research by showing modern mobility reimagines the idea of identity in the Chinese landscape. Furthermore, the Chinese Road Movie has further developed into a multi-perspectival cinematic form traversing multiple social and spatial terrains. By examining class subjects, from migrant workers to the urban background of China's middle class, this study provides a crucial prototype of the intersection of class and masculinity in contemporary Chinese cinema.

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