

Transborder Mobility and Movement: Exploring Lim Giong and Midi Z's Documentary Audiovisuality

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Abstract

This paper examines the collaborative relationship between filmmaker Midi Z and composer Lim Giong, focusing on their shared affinity with film and music as truth-telling art mediums. It highlights their audiovisual aesthetics transcend conventional documentary realism by blending imaginative elements with real-life depictions and embedding authentic details within fictionalized narratives. Through a close analysis of their collaboration in *City of Jade* (2016), the study explores how their integration of sound and image constructs a dynamic soundscape that reflects experiences of migration, displacement, and dislocation. Particular attention is given to how Lim Giong's experimental music techniques shape the fluid boundaries between reality and fiction in Midi Z's transnational documentary filmmaking. Ultimately, this paper argues that the film's soundscape mirrors the director's personal history of cross-border movement and mobility, linking subjective expression with broader geopolitical and cultural contexts.

Keywords: *City of Jade*, Midi Z, Lim Giong, transborder narratives, first-person documentary, audiovisual aesthetic

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Introduction

Midi Z's cross-border filmmaking has garnered significant attention at both Taiwanese and international film festivals. His early "Homecoming Trilogy"—*Return to Burma* (2011), *Poor Folk* (2012), and *Ice Poison* (2014)—draws inspiration from his and his family's cross-border experiences between Myanmar, Thailand, and Taiwan. These feature films, shot digitally, explore the themes of Chinese diaspora by blending documentary aesthetics with fictional narratives. Not only did these independent productions establish Midi Z's status as an auteur director, but they also showcased his unique aesthetics, characterized by "DV realism," "diasporic filmmaking," and "audioscapes" (Wang 2017: 156–157; Bernards 2021: 352–354). These elements reflect his personal experiences of cross-border mobility and his marginalized diasporic identity.

This transborder experience has attracted scholarly and media attention, particularly in relation to his "Homecoming Trilogy" and the discourse surrounding his Sinophone diasporic cinema. His films employ personal and subjective techniques to explore themes of identity, fluidity, and border-crossing, while also engaging with broader geopolitical, historical, and cultural contexts (Wang 2017; Ma 2020; Bernards 2021). To further develop this discourse, this paper will shift the focus to *City of Jade* (2016), positioning it as a key example of Midi Z's distinctive audiovisual approach to personal documentary within the framework of the Taiwan New Documentary Movement that flourished during the 2010s. Moreover, with musical scores composed by Lim Giong, *City of Jade* reveals how Midi Z's personal narratives evolve into more complex, multilayered perspectives on his connection with Burmese society. They also demonstrate his innovative narrative storytelling techniques, utilizing the cinematic medium to explore audiovisual aesthetics that reflect his anxieties about marginality, mobility, and transborder filmmaking.

Midi Z's filmmaking is deeply related to his cross-border experiences and identity. His works defy classification into specific genres, just as his identity resists being neatly framed as either "Chinese Burmese" or "Burmese Taiwanese," as such labels risk overlooking the complex migratory trajectories and diasporic subjectivity (Ma 2020: 200). His family's migration history illustrates the geopolitical impact of wartime upheavals on Chinese immigrants and diasporic communities post-World War II. During the Second Sino-Japanese War, his grandfather had been sent by the Nationalist government from Nanjing to construct the Burma Road in Yunnan. In the Chinese Civil War, the retreat of the Nationalist forces triggered a refugee wave, during which his grandfather and father fled from Yunnan to Myanmar. Born and raised in the border city of Lashio during the 1980s and 1990s, Midi Z witnessed firsthand his family's struggles for survival, including their illegal crossings between Myanmar, Thailand, and China. His sister illegally migrated to Thailand to work, dreaming of going to Taiwan but never realizing it. His elder brother sought fortune in the jade mines of Hpakant but returned after years grueling labor, empty-handed and emotionally depleted. Isolated and disillusioned, he turned to drug use as a means of coping with loneliness and despair.

In 1998, at the age of 16, Midi Z participated in an entrance exam for overseas Chinese schools in Taiwan, a highly competitive process with only 50 slots for 6,000 applicants. Despite the

challenging circumstances, he was admitted, supported by his eldest sister's financial help and his parents' relentless efforts to raise funds. Navigating bureaucratic hurdles, he eventually obtained a passport and visa to come to Taiwan. He enrolled in Taichung Industrial High School's printing department. A pivotal moment occurred when he helped a sworn brother in Myanmar purchase a DV camera to record a wedding. Due to Myanmar's strict import controls on photographic equipment, the camera was returned. Midi Z began experimenting with the camera, initially recording friends' lives and eventually earning money by filming weddings. After high school, he was admitted to the Department of Industrial and Commercial Design at National Taiwan University of Science and Technology. Using the DV camera, he created his graduation project, *Pigeon*, and continued making short films, which led to his selection as a member of the inaugural class at the Golden Horse Film Academy, mentored by Hou Hsiao-Hsien.

Due to restrictions imposed by Myanmar's government on its citizens' visiting Taiwan—aimed at appeasing China—Midi Z was unable to return to his hometown until 2008. In 2010, after obtaining Taiwanese citizenship, he directed his first feature film, *Return to Burma*, set in Myanmar. The film marked the beginning of his cross-border filmmaking journey, using his camera to document the constantly changing and harsh realities faced by diasporic Chinese communities amid Myanmar's political turbulence. Following *Return to Burma*, the first installment of his "Homecoming Trilogy," Midi Z received funding from Taiwan's Public Television Service to simultaneously produce two documentaries, *Jade Miners* (2015) and *City of Jade*. The so-called "Jade Duology" were shot in Hpakant, a town in Myanmar's Kachin State renowned as the "Jade City" for its rich jade mines. Analyzing the production conditions and aesthetic choices in these films reveals the turbulence of his and his family's experiences of cross-border migration, including illegal smuggling and life on the margins.

Both *Jade Miners* and *City of Jade* explore the intersection of personal history, family ties, and the exploitive realities of Myanmar's jade mining industry. The shooting of these two documentaries coincided with Midi's reunion with his elder brother Zhao De-Chin (the eldest of the five Zhao siblings) back in Myanmar in 2012. Before this, De-Chin had been separated from the family for sixteen years. The two documentaries present contrasting yet complementary perspectives: *Jade Miners* focuses on the external, observational depiction of jade mining labor, while *City of Jade* provides a deeply personal account of Midi Z's family's survival and connection to the jade industry. As Ran Ma observes, *City of Jade*, narrated in Yunnanese dialect by Midi Z himself, offers an intimate, first-person documentary that reflects on his family's hardship, interwoven with their persistent struggles for survival (Ma 2020: 202).

For those who consider *Jade Miners* to be more "authentic" than *City of Jade*, director Midi Z clarifies that while *Jade Miners* relies on the editing and juxtaposition of shots to shape the audience's understanding, the voiceovers in *City of Jade* express his real, unfiltered voice.¹ In other words, even seemingly objective documentaries contain the techniques of fiction, such as structure and pacing, which the director designs and arranges—something often critiqued from the

¹ Yi-Hsiu Lin. "From 'Mediating' Reality to 'Directorial' Realism—Midi Z and His Evolving Style in The Road to Mandalay." *Funscreen Weekly*, no. 585, 2016, Taiwan Film & Audiovisual Institute.

perspective of the conventional realism associated with documentary filmmaking. Such critiques apply even more to the use of voiceover. The role of voiceover in documentaries has long been debated. While it can offer additional information and perspectives, it is also seen as potentially interfering with the idea of “truth.” Documentaries traditionally aim to convey a sense of authenticity, yet the voiceover, as a sound coming from outside the film’s world, can lead viewers to question the realism of the visuals.

Documentary theorists have long debated whether the use of voiceover undermines the authenticity of documentaries. Some, like Bill Nichols, argue that voiceover-driven documentaries fall under the “expository mode,” which is one of the earliest and most didactic forms of documentary filmmaking (Nichols 2010: 31–32). According to Nichols, while sync sound “helps anchor the meaning of the images” (Nichols 1981: 200), narration is seen as an intrusion which interferes with the natural domination of the image and also distances the spectator through its authoritative tone. This perspective contends that voiceover, especially the “voice of God” style, imposes the director’s viewpoint on the audience, restricting their ability to interpret the visuals independently (Nichols 2010: 158–162). However, Stella Bruzzi critiques this linear view, challenging the notion that voiceover inherently disrupts the purity of film image. She argues not all voiceovers conform to the simplistic “voice of God” model and suggests that voiceover can be used to subvert traditional narration through irony, self-reflection, and a reimagining of the conventional first-person narrator role (Bruzzi 2000: 40–45).

Cross Boundaries: City of Jade as First-person Documentary

Since 1962, Myanmar’s military government has enforced prolonged authoritarian isolation, resulting in widespread hardships for its people. Drug trafficking, jade mining, and working overseas have become three common paths through which they struggle to survive, and these themes are recurrent in Midi Z’s films. After the Saffron Revolution in 2007 and the revision of the constitution in 2008, Myanmar began a gradual transition towards democratic reform. It was during this period that director Midi Z started creating a series of Sino-Burmese films, highlighting the struggles of those caught between life inside and outside Myanmar. Drawing from the personal experiences of his family and friends, Midi Z’s films portray the displacement of Myanmar’s Chinese diaspora and the perpetual movement shaped by military control. By shifting perspectives, he not only captures individual hardships but also conveys the broader sense of instability and unease amid social change, adding depth to his portrayal of struggle and migration.

City of Jade centers on the jade mining regions of Myanmar, portraying Midi Z’s brother’s struggles with drug addiction and his brother’s life as a miner in Hpakant, Kachin State, in northern Myanmar, while also addressing the environmental and social ramifications of the jade industry. Through the transborder narratives, *City of Jade* reflects Midi Z’s exploration of documentary filmmaking as a medium that negotiates the blurred and fluid boundaries between authenticity and creativity, as well as those between personal and political expression. In an interview, Midi Zi argues that the authenticity of a documentary should not be judged by its aesthetic form but by the

sincerity of the filmmaker's intent. He contends that techniques such as long takes, short takes, or voiceovers do not inherently determine a documentary's authenticity; what truly matters is the "design" and "strategy" behind these decisions and how effectively they serve the film's theme and message.² *City of Jade* exemplifies this approach. Unlike his earlier work, *Jade Miners*, which employs an objective, observational style to realistically depict the jade miners' living conditions without dramatic embellishment, *City of Jade* adopts a more personal, introspective tone. Through voiceovers and staged scenes, the film captures Midi Zi's subjective feelings about the jade mine and his brother, transforming it into an intimate cinematic diary.

In *City of Jade*, Midi Z documents the jade mining industry; he captures the harsh realities faced by miners, including his brother, while revealing the socioeconomic and environmental consequences of the trade. His portrayal of Myanmar is deeply personal yet imbued with a sense of detachment, reflecting his complex position as an outsider—someone who left the country to study and work abroad but who remains emotionally tethered to it. This dual perspective, as both an outsider and someone intimately familiar with the local context, creates the recurring tension in his work. However, the role of an outsider is not a fixed position; while Midi Z attempts to maintain detachment, his distance functions more as a protective strategy rather than a neutral stance. His return to Myanmar becomes both an act of reconnection and a process of critical examination. By consistently bringing a camera and a small crew into the country, Midi Z constructs a filmmaking apparatus that simultaneously bridges with and distances him from his subjects. This approach reinforces Midi Z's role as an observer, amplifying the emotional estrangement inherent in his dual position while enabling him to engage with the subject matter in a first-person voice that extends beyond the filmmaker's self, fostering a more interactive, dialogic dynamic rather than a subject-object relationship.

In her introduction to *The Cinema of Me: The Self and Subjectivity in First Person Documentary*, Alisa Lebow provides a framework for understanding the first-person filmmaking approach in *City of Jade*. She argues that even when a filmmaker speaks as "I," their expression is inherently relational, reinforcing the idea that cinema—no matter how personal—is always engaged in a broader social dialogue (Lebow 2012a: 2). Her argument also challenges Western individualist thinking about the self, emphasizing that subjectivity is not universal, but its representation is complex and constructed through mediations with others. In this view, self-representation involves a paradoxical process that goes beyond a simple subject-object dynamic. Rather than merely depicting a pre-existing self, the representation of self plays an active role in shaping and constituting identity, revealing self as a fluid, mobile, and fragmented nature of subjectivity (2012a: 4).

Applying this insightful analytic framework to first-person documentary, Lebow, in her chapter "The Camera as Peripatetic Migration Machine," discusses that in migratory contexts, the camera transcends its traditional role as a reflective tool, becoming an active participant in the transitory and fragmented nature of migration. It serves not only as a symbol of mobility but also a catalyst

² "The Calm and Passion within the Jade Mines—An Interview with Director Midi Z on *City of Jade*." *BIOS Monthly*, 3 October 2016. <https://www.biosmonthly.com/article/7232> Accessed 2 October 2024.

for transbordering, a mechanism that both propels and shapes the migratory experience (Lebow 2012b: 220–221). In this light, *City of Jade* is not only the practice of first-person filmmaking but also a part of a broader transborder movement that generates both emotional and critical distance. Midi Z's camera, therefore, becomes more than a recording device; it is integral to the storytelling process, mediating between personal experience, cultural identity, and cinematic form. By capturing traces of life in perpetual motion, the camera transforms these fleeting moments into enduring artistic expression, reinforcing first-person documentary filmmaking as a practice deeply entwined with the instability and fluidity of migration.

In *City of Jade*, the extensive use of poetic voiceovers and carefully composed scenes infuses the documentary with a literary and artistic dimension, creating a hybrid narrative that feels both real and symbolic. This fusion of personal reflection and poetic narration deepens the depiction of his brother's experience, adding layers of meaning beyond the observational. By pushing the limits of first-person documentary, Midi Z challenges viewers' expectations of personal narratives, employing audiovisual techniques to explore complexity about his fluid identity and migratory experience, his family ties, and his connection to Burmese society, while engaging with broader social, political, and artistic concerns.

Lim Giong's Sound Aesthetics and the "Me Generation"

Midi Z's first-person documentary can be understood within the evolving context of personal narratives in the Taiwan New Documentary Movement. This approach gained prominence in East Asian documentary filmmaking in the 1990s, a shift mirrored in Taiwan as filmmakers moved from social intervention to personal expression, ultimately leading to the emergence of the "personal documentary" genre in the early 2000s (Chiu 2015:56). Film critic and film festival curator Wen Tien-hsiang characterized the emerging documentary filmmakers of this period as the "Me Generation," noting their focus on personal stories, often self-referential and involving family and friends (Wen 2008: 6–9). By the mid-2010s, personal documentary filmmaking continued to evolve, with directors exploring diverse themes through innovative aesthetic approaches. These films are distinguished by their experimental audiovisual techniques, blurring the boundaries between reality and fiction while featuring introspective and intimate narratives.

A paradigm shift towards a realist aesthetic in documentary sound is especially evident in the works of a new generation of filmmakers, such as Midi Z, Huang Hui-chen, and Huang Pangchuan. This "Me Generation," as previously discussed, prioritizes personal narratives and family histories, representing a significant trend in Taiwan documentary filmmaking. Influenced by Lim Giong's sound aesthetics, these filmmakers not only extend the sound realism he developed with directors Hou Hsiao-hsien and Jia Zhangke but also reinvent the personal documentary through innovative audiovisual approaches. The emphasis on personal narratives within the genre aligns with Lim's constant self-reinvention and continuous exploration of documentary sound aesthetics. In the late 1990s, Lim Giong began exploring electronic music and integrating it into film scores. His collaborations with director Hou Hsiao-hsien on *Goodbye South, Goodbye* and *Millennium*

Mambo heavily featured electronic music, introducing a fresh experience to Taiwan cinema (Wang 2021: 89–124). Lim Giong believes that electronic music is very niche and experimental, allowing a focus on creating abstract atmospheres and sound effects to reflect the creator's inner world and their responses to external changes. After 2000, Lim Giong embarked on cross-border collaborations with Jia Zhangke, scoring his films with electronic synthesizers to expand the sonic imagination of material reality. Moving away from the cultural symbolism associated with traditional instruments, Lim employed machines and electronic sounds to create expressions that transcend conventional notions of realism. His electronic music contributed to a shift in Jia Zhangke's "on-the-spot" documentary realism, combining electronic music with ambient sounds to shape a distinctive "xianchang poetics" which employs DV, a personal filmmaking device, to redefine documentary sound aesthetics (Wang 2022).

After being established as a film composer by collaborating with renowned directors such as Hou Hsiao-hsien and Jia Zhangke, Lim Giong began to work with Taiwan's new generation of directors, composing scores for their documentaries and pushing the boundaries of sound aesthetics in documentary filmmaking. Lim Giong's collaborations with these directors have mainly focused on personal documentaries. His music interacts with the narration and visuals to build a more intimate and reflective storytelling experience. For example, in his work with director Huang Hui-chen on *Small Talk*, a documentary exploring LGBTQ identity and family relationships, Lim's minimalist electronic score creates a sense of oppression and alienation, contrasting with Huang's calm narration. This juxtaposition underscores the struggles of LGBTQ identity and the emotional distance in family relationships depicted in the film. Moreover, in his collaboration with director Huang Pang-chuan on two documentary shorts, *The Return* (2017) and *Last Year When the Train Passed By* (2018), Lim's soundtracks play a crucial role in shaping space and atmosphere. He merges environmental sound effects with other sound elements to create a richer, multilayered soundscape that traverses various cultural borders, encompassing both abstract and concrete auditory elements.

Lim Giong's collaborations with these new-generation directors and their personal documentary filmmaking exemplify his exploration and innovation in the sound aesthetics of documentaries. His work not only holds artistic value but also carries significant social and cultural implications. By using music as a medium, Lim addresses social issues, documents the changes of the times, and demonstrates the creative vitality and social consciousness of contemporary filmmakers in Taiwan and China. His electronic music creations possess a transmediality, allowing them to transform, communicate, and merge across different media within the "impurity" of documentaries which blend various art forms. Through diverse musical styles, rich sound elements, and experimental techniques, Lim has created a unique sonic world that expands the possibilities of sound aesthetics in personal documentary filmmaking. This innovative approach leads to a reconsideration of the relationship between narration, sound effects, and visual expression, as well as how experimental documentary sound can reveal realism, ultimately leading to the creation of a new audiovisual language that transcends narrative layers and crosses diverse cultural borders.

Midi Z skillfully employs personal documentary voices to evoke a unique blend of alienation and intimacy, as well as subjectivity and objectivity, to capture the tension between Myanmar's ethnic minorities and cultural hegemony. Additionally, Midi Z integrates mobile soundscapes to mirror his personal navigation of identity as a Burmese-Taiwanese filmmaker. The switching between accents and the displacement of locations and languages—such as hearing Yunnanese with Thai-Burmese inflections in Zhonghe—further explore the complexity and ambiguity of these characters' cultural identities. Engaging with transnational independent film cultures and personal documentary trends, Midi Z's work bridges personal and collective narratives, offering perspectives on diasporic experiences and transcultural identity. This drive to explore marginalized voices is particularly evident in his personal documentaries like *City of Jade*, which embody the formal expression of the struggles faced by marginalized individuals.

Therefore, Midi Z's documentary aesthetics transcend mere individual artistic pursuit; they are closely linked to his personal emotions and observations of Burmese society. His films weave his own experiences, family stories, and social observation, turning them into powerful tools for both self-expression and social critique. While visually capturing the unique landscapes of Myanmar, his works also explore auditory dimensions of environmental oppression, individual struggles, and the complexities of human existence. Midi Z's cinematic aesthetics present a distinctive audiovisual style that employs vibrant sound and music, intricately connected to the social realities and psychological states of characters in Myanmar. In his feature films, the rich incorporation of popular songs and sounds resonates with the characters' emotions and the narrative context. Moreover, the choice of settings, such as karaoke bars and train stations reflect the socio-economic complexities of contemporary Burmese society and highlights the characters' precarious conditions and struggles for survival. In his documentaries, Midi Z deliberately minimizes the use of non-diegetic music, instead integrating ambient sounds to enhance the deeper level of authenticity. His creative manipulation of sound challenges the conventions of documentary realism that emphasize the faithful recording of reality, avoiding any elements that could be seen as manipulative or subjective, such as the use of non-diegetic sound and music. By combining real locations and individuals with fictional elements, Midi Z creates a unique audiovisual aesthetic in documentary filmmaking that blurs the boundaries between documentary and fictional narratives.

Lim Giong recognizes Midi Z's documentary filmmaking style, especially how he manages to create a distinctive aesthetic in filming under impoverished, precarious, and marginalized conditions.³ Lim explains that their collaboration began at an event during the Golden Horse Film Festival where Lim Giong noticed Midi Z's short films.⁴ He was impressed by Midi Z's ability to create documentaries with a unique style despite resource constraints. Lim especially admired how Midi Z's "Homecoming Trilogy" films—*Return to Burma*, *Poor Folk*, and *Ice Poison*—are presented in a semi-documentary format. These films blend real events and people with fictional narratives, creating an atmosphere that blurs the line between reality and illusion.

³ Interview conducted by the author (16 September 2024).

⁴ Interview conducted by the author (16 September 2024).

Midi Z's views on documentary authenticity echo Lim Giong's creative approach—that the truth of a documentary does not lie in the equipment or techniques used but rather in the creator's introspective pursuit of reality. For Lim Giong, his approach to composing film scores using electronic music transcends merely mimicking sounds of the real world; instead, it expresses the creator's inner emotions and reflections on reality through abstract sound forms. For example, while composing the score for Jia Zhangke's film *Still Life*, Lim recorded rich environmental noises from the Three Gorges area, including boat collisions and construction sounds. These auditory elements not only create an authentic atmosphere for the film but also enhance the audience's awareness of the environmental changes and the living conditions of people in the Three Gorges region. This approach resonates with director Midi Z's view of "truth," which suggests that "truth" is not an absolute objective reality but is conveyed through the filmmaker's subjective choices and designs. Lim Giong's compositional method provides a form of sound expression that goes beyond the material dimensions of realism, granting directors greater freedom to convey their interpretation of reality.

Both Lim and Midi's creative journeys illustrate that truth and fiction are not opposing concepts but rather subjective constructs. They view audiovisual material not merely as objective tools for capturing the world but as mediums that mediate creators' interactions with the world and their understanding of their own existence. Through the interweaving of reality and fiction in their audiovisual work, Lim and Midi demonstrate how documentaries can actively shape human perception and cultural meaning, offering an authentic portrayal of the perceived world. The fluidity and flow in both the form and content of their dynamic use of image and sound as creative mediums transcends the boundaries between reality and fiction. More importantly, their work also crosses borders to reflect on the survival conditions of people experiencing transborder mobility and marginalization, displacement and movement, and migration and adaptation.

Border-Crossing Movements in City of Jade

As previously mentioned, *City of Jade* represents Midi Z's most dual perspective, positioning him simultaneously as observer and participant, subject and object in his migratory experience and his family ties. While the use of voiceover narration and music may seem less objective to traditional realists, these elements enable him to actively engage in the narrative rather than remain a detached observer. Inserting himself into the story, Midi Z employs first-person narration to express his personal perspective, reflecting on the complex relationship between himself as a filmmaker and his brother as the subject. Throughout the film, the boundaries between their roles become fluid, reflecting their conflicted bond, complicating the conventional subject-object dynamic. While Midi Z initially frames his older brother as the filmed subject and himself as a filmmaker, there are moments when his brother actively participates in staging certain scenes, momentarily assuming the dominant role. In these moments, the power dynamic shifts—his older brother takes control of the filmmaking process, disrupting the established hierarchy and crossing

the conventional boundaries between the subjective and objective positions in the filming process.

This approach necessitates a double position of subjects. As Lebow discusses in relation to first-person documentary, it entails a dialogic splitting of subjectivity, where the filmmaker is both the subject in the film (a participant within the narrative) and the subject of the film (the thematic/analytical focus) (Lebow 2012a: 4–5). She elaborates on the dual role of the filmmaker by referring to Michael Renov's *The Subject of Documentary*, in which the layered double position is implied that the filmmaker is both observer and participant in exploring how migration and its movement and fluidity shape the first-person documentary voice (Lebow 2012a: 5; Renov 2004: xxiv). This idea resonates with Midi Z's distinctive use of first-person voiceover narration, in which he uses the camera as a medium not only to record family migration but also to show the fluidity and movement of his own migrant identities.

In *City of Jade*, Midi Z's voiceover narration is frequently paired with scenes of travel. Following his opening narration, in which he reflects on his long-held imagination of Jade City and its history relating to his family's migration, the scene shifts to his brother sitting in the local slide-car, then embarking on a train journey to Hpakant. Through Midi Z's voiceover, we learn that this is the place where his family, especially his brother, dreamed of transforming their lives and longed to return. In these sequences, his narration is accompanied by Lim Giong's electronic music, with traditional instrumental sounds subtly emerging in the background, seamlessly blending into the film's soundscape to evoke both movement and memory.

Such recurring soundscapes, present throughout Midi Z's feature films, capture the relentless movement of Yunnanese migrants, threading through the border towns of Myanmar, Thailand, and China. Their ceaseless mobility not only reflects the uncertainty and precarity of migration but also conveys a deeper sense of displacement, both geographically and emotionally. Beyond physical movement, Midi Z's films also explore identity through linguistic fluidity. The shifting accents of his characters underscore the diasporic experience of Myanmar's Chinese community, further complicating the boundaries of cultural belonging. Bernards specifically highlights, in films set along the Myanmar-Thailand borderlands—such as *Poor Folk* (2012) and *The Road to Mandalay* (2016)—that Midi Z employs Sinophone and Siamophone audioscapes as aesthetic tools to illuminate the experiences of undocumented Sino-Burmese migrants (Bernards 2021: 353–354). These soundscapes embody both the characters' and Midi Z's drifting and dislocation, representing the shifting relationships with cultural, economic, and geopolitical forces, but also reflect their precarious positions and liminal existence.

Midi Z skillfully weaves linguistic discrepancies into his first-person narration to create a sense of dissonance, revealing the tensions between Myanmar's ethnic minorities and its cultural hegemony. In *City of Jade*, the shifts between accents and the blending of locations and languages underscore the diasporic identity of Myanmar's Chinese community. The auditory experience of Yunnanese spoken with Thai-Burmese inflections in Zhonghe adds further complexity and ambiguity to the characters' cultural identities, reflecting the layered realities of displacement and cross-border belonging. This fluid interplay of language extends into the soundtrack, where Lim's

electronic compositions, ambient noises, and traditional instrumental sounds enhance the sense of movement, dissonance, and uncertainty. The integration of sound strengthens the film's visual elements, reinforcing the precarity of migration while evoking a deeper sense of displacement—both geographically and emotionally. As the film's composer, Lim incorporates on-location sounds recorded by Midi Z in Myanmar, integrating local instruments, chanting, and children's voices into his score. This approach blends collectivity and subjectivity, concreteness and abstractness, adding a poetic and experimental dimension to Midi Z's first-person documentary style.

This is also evident in the use of poetry featured in Midi Z's films. In the voiceover for *City of Jade*, he references Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground* to reflect on the tension between rationality and madness, offering deeper meditation on irrational and chaotic aspects of humanity. Starting with the short film *Huasin Incident* (2009), continuing through the "Homecoming Trilogy," and extending to the recent *Clinic* (2023) and *Cherry Ferry* (2024), Midi Z consistently engages with personal documentary narratives and demonstrates an affinity with characters affected by anxiety and depression, who sing, recite poetry, or read novels. For these characters, such acts serve as an outlet or form of escapism, while for the director they function as an expressive medium for conveying his own experience of transborder movement and diasporic mobility.

Holly Rogers (2015) observes that the use of sound—especially music—in documentary filmmaking often challenges traditional conventions by introducing the filmmaker's subjective interpretation. In direct cinema and cinéma vérité, only synchronous sound—meaning sound that originates from within the filmed scene—is traditionally employed. This realist approach aims to preserve an unmediated sense of reality, allowing the audience to feel as if they are directly witnessing events as they naturally unfold (2). In *City of Jade*, Lim Giong's creative composition extends the use of local Myanmar sounds beyond their visual counterparts, reshaping the film's audiovisual material in ways that blur the boundaries between documentary and fiction.

Challenging the conventional binary distinctions in sound—such as diegetic and non-diegetic, objective and subjective, real and imitative—results in a more fluid audiovisual experience in Midi Z's film. This integration not only disrupts traditional nonfiction aesthetics but also redefines the role of sound, reimagining it as a dynamic element that both emerges from and transforms the original source. This process highlights the interplay between musicality and ambient noise, encouraging the audience to engage with both natural and mediated soundscapes. In this way, *City of Jade* does not simply use sound to support the image; rather, it facilitates a deeper authenticity by intertwining personal emotions, imagination, and factual content.

Lim Giong's sound aesthetics in documentary filmmaking not only hold artistic value but also possess social and cultural significance. His long-term collaboration with Midi Z demonstrates their innovation in the sound aesthetics of documentary filmmaking as the dialectic between reality and fiction. Traditionally, documentaries are seen as an objective recording of reality, while the addition of music and sound is often regarded as a subjective intervention that may undermine the authenticity of the documentary. However, their audiovisual documentary approaches challenge

this binary opposition. They believe that sound, like visuals, can depict reality and evoke imaginative fiction. Sound and image can complement one another, engage in dialogue, and together construct a deeper, layered reality that captures the transborder cultures, as well as the feelings and emotions of the people within them.

Conclusion

City of Jade stands as a defining work that exemplifies Midi Z's unique audiovisual approach to his boundary-crossing documentary filmmaking, reflecting experiences of mobility and migration. Through these films, Midi Z weaves personal narratives into broader social and political contexts, offering an intimate yet critical perspective on Myanmar's tumultuous landscape. His filmmaking is characterized by a fluidity and mobility that enable him to move seamlessly between the real and the constructed. His use of staged scenes, poetic voiceovers, and non-linear narratives challenges the conventional boundaries of documentary, pushing the medium toward new, hybrid forms. This technique of traversing between documentary and fiction allows Midi Z to explore deeper truths about both the human condition and the sociopolitical realities of Myanmar. His approach is not limited to objective depiction of reality but expands into the realm of subjective experience, personal reflection, and symbolic storytelling, further complicating the line between what is real and what is imagined.

Lim Giong's contributions as a musician and composer complement this exploration of movement and fluidity. Renowned for his dynamic and experimental soundscapes, Lim Giong's work in film and music often parallels the mobility inherent in Midi Z's visual narratives. His soundtracks, which blend traditional elements with electronic compositions, create an auditory space that oscillates between the familiar and the unfamiliar—much like Midi Z's visual style. This fluidity in Lim's compositions reinforces a sense of movement and transition, both physically and metaphorically, as his music echoes the themes of dislocation, migration, and cultural hybridity present in the films. By employing synthesizers to generate a continuous flow of abstract musical forms, Lim transforms sound into a dynamic, flowing stream. In the realm of electronic music, sound becomes an imagined form shaped by volume, space, and speed. Drawing from Lim Giong's experimental approach to sound, Midi Z continues to explore innovative ways to use audio to shape unique transborder experiences.

Midi Z and Lim Giong engage in collaborative work on sound and image, crafting films that move between the real and imagined, subjective and objective, and the personal and political. Their creative partnership and artistic visions have continued in Midi Z's later works, *The Clinic*, and *Cherry Ferry*. Their distinctive boundary-crossing aesthetic consistently invites viewers to question not only the authenticity of what they see and hear, but also to inquire into the deeper truths these films seek to reveal. By challenging conventional approaches to film music, Midi Z and Lim Giong expand the sonic aesthetics of documentary filmmaking, creating a cinematic space that is fluid, mobile, and ever-evolving, much like the landscapes and people they depict. In the end, *City of Jade* represents their broader artistic ambitions: to use the medium of film not merely

as a means of capturing reality but as a medium of representation, reinterpretation, and transformation, offering new perspectives on the complexities of life in contemporary Myanmar and beyond.

Filmography

- Huasin Incident* 華新街紀事, d. Midi Z 趙德胤, 2009.
Return to Burma 歸來的人, d. Midi Z 趙德胤, 2011.
Poor Folk 窮人。榴槤。麻藥。偷渡客, d. Midi Z 趙德胤, 2012.
Ice Poison 冰毒, d. Midi Z 趙德胤, 2014.
Jade Miners 挖玉石的人, d. Midi Z 趙德胤, 2015.
City of Jade 翡翠之城, d. Midi Z 趙德胤, 2016.
Clinic 診所, d. Midi Z 趙德胤, 2023.
Cherry Ferry 櫻桃號, d. Midi Z 趙德胤, 2024.

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