

Analyzing the narrative context of post-industrial audio-visual works in Northeast China from the absurdity in the documentary *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2002)

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Abstract. Since 2019, Northeastern post-industrial culture has been a popular topic of discussion; the general public refers to it as the Northeastern Renaissance. Crises of identity, honor, and faith have been recurring themes in several Northeastern films released in recent years. Furthermore, these cinematic narratives frequently generate somber humor by presenting an enormous contrast between ideals and actuality. The article examines how the post-industrial narrative context of Northeast China has influenced audio-visual cultural products and contemporary Chinese popular culture. To elucidate the fundamental aspect of the Northeast narrative, the article's author employs the absurd theory of Albert Camus. The main structure and viewpoints of the article are as follows: The first is after presenting individuals' contemplations on the Northeastern Renaissance-instigated post-industrial narrative of the Northeast. In the following sections, the article explores the narrative context of post-industrial audio-visual works in Northeast China, focusing on the absurdity depicted in the documentary *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2002). The authors' analysis reveals how the documentary captures the socio-economic decline and the resulting human experiences of absurdity and dislocation. Key findings indicate that the narrative structure and visual style effectively convey the bleak realities of post-industrial life, offering critical insights into the region's socio-cultural transformation. These findings suggest that future research should explore the intersection of visual media and social change in other post-industrial contexts.

1 Introduction

The Northeast Renaissance came up in 2019 during a discussion on a talk show program by music producer Baoshi Gem [15], who rose to fame with the R&B song *Yelang Disco* (means wild wolf disco) (2019). The "Renaissance" quickly gained public attention as a literary and artistic phenomenon due to the selfmedia dissemination effect. According to Gem, writers and artists worked together to start the Northeast Renaissance, which is more than just a fad. Cantonese choruses and Mandarin rap make up *Yelang Disco*. Many Cantonese native speakers have condemned the wrong pronunciation and see it as cultural appropriation [14]. On Zhihu, a well-known Chinese Quora-type question and answer site, many people defended these accusations, primarily because Cantonese pop

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song and film culture is an integral part of Northeastern post-industrial culture. Some critics think that imitating Cantonese pronunciation reflects the delusion of a better life for people from the Northeast who wish to leave their current situation [12]. The discussion that Gem started has not ended. The well-liked television show *The Long Season* (2023) sparked conversations about the Northeast Renaissance once more in 2023. The film has garnered positive reviews, and its masterful use of literary expression skillfully captures the bewilderment, immobility, and confusion exhibited by the people in the Northeast as they prepare to enter the post-industrial transition phase.

Yelang Disco and *The Long Season* are two examples of audio-visual art pieces that depict day-to-day living in industrial communities in the Northeast that were impacted by the fallout from the Soviet Union's collapse in the 1990s. *Yelang Disco* tells the tale of an unhappy relationship that occurred in a disco in the 1980s and 1990s. The song's references to men's fashion include the Motorola beeper, fur coat, and slicked-back look that embody that era's allure. Later in the story, the male character tells people, "I never thought she'd ask me to check myself in the mirror like that" [2]. In general, the mirror represents introspection. Gem sings, "The beat's thumpin', moves keep groovin', clueless vibes, like we ain't improvin'" [2], after a conversation goes nowhere. This self-satisfying mindset also infuses *The Long Season*'s storyline. The series' central plot revolves around Wang Xiang, the male lead, who helps the police with a criminal investigation in an effort to justify his continued employment. Frequently, Wang consoled himself by reminding himself that his father had taken part in the groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of the first factory, and this lineage ought to keep him employed.

This type of self-comfort is prevalent in the famous audio-visual works of today that showcase Northeastern culture. The documentary *Tie Xi Qu: West of the Tracks* (2002), which depicts Northeast China's post-industrial age, is where this expression technique first appeared. The director, Wang Bing, created this documentary in the latter part of the 1990s. Three segments, "Rust," "Remnants," and "Rails," comprised the final cut of the entire film. *Tie Xi Qu* is a valuable first-hand source of information about China Northeast's economic transformation period, as its production coincided with it. It will help interpret other post-industrial Northeastern narratives in films mentioned later that inevitably feature visual elements such as factories, workshops, railways, trains, chess and card rooms, mahjong parlors, and karaoke dance halls.

The Northeast's post-industrial narrative originates from China abandoning the collective economy. Given this, Northeastern society suffers significantly and strongly depends on this economic model. Tragedy at the end of the 20th century is not individual, but, as Camus (1950) noted, "Today tragedy is collective" [17]. The Northeast narrative remains a significant aspect of contemporary Chinese popular culture. This article asserts that interpreting it requires starting with the absurdity of China's post-industrial period. To that purpose, this essay draws on Albert Camus's idea of the absurd in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and examines the story of the documentary *Tie Xi Qu* to understand the Northeastern context in contemporary audio-visual art.

2 Exploring the element of absurd in the narratives of *Tie Xi Qu*

Tie Xi Qu, according to researcher William Brown, is a seminal piece in the annals of Chinese documentary [18]. The film comprehensively narrates the transformation of the working class's social standing [20, 21]. It emphasizes the poignant incidents of ordinary people going about their daily lives, adding complexity and depth to its meaning by transcending mere depictions of the fall of the Iron Curtain regime to explore individual empowerment. For instance, researcher Qi Wang states, "history or space it records is therefore not something whose meaning is already concluded" [13].

The writers above argue that this documentary delves into more than just politics. As Bérénice Reynaud asserts, *Tie Xi Qu* addresses the passing of a particular way of life, predominantly among men [3]. Inspired by this perspective, the writers of this article expand the idea, suggesting that the film reflects absurdity by illustrating the passage of time and the extinction of lifestyles.

In the modernist literature of the twentieth century, absurdity is a central theme. These literary works frequently create an anti-realist universe in which "the very essence or truth of reality is absurd" [9]. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, the term "absurd" refers to human contingency [5] or "That which

is meaningless” [10]. The prominent writer who deeply explored the concept of absurdity, Albert Camus, believed that “the absurd arises out of the ‘confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world’” [1, 5]. He posited that there are five key factors that bring about an awareness of the absurd: “weariness” (the monotony of daily existence that undermines the worth and meaning of one’s existence); “time” (a heightened awareness of the passage of time); “strangeness” (a sense of alienation within one’s surroundings); and “death” (the knowledge that death is an unattainable experience) [1].

In the first part of *Tie Xi Qu* with the theme Rust, the cross-editing is full of scenes of workers playing cards, working, resting, gathering, and dining. These scenarios resemble Camus’s description of what causes weariness:

[...] four hours in the [...] factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday, according to the same rhythm [...]. [1]

The film’s beginning features a quarrel caused by a card game, and the film ends with a Chinese chess game. These games occur in the same space, implying that the workers’ lives consist merely of the repeated movement of their machinery. Everything that happens in the factory is imbued with a sense of panic caused by the layoffs, and this panic stimulates the aimless people in the utopia as a whole. For example, in the opening quarrel caused by the card game, the insulted drunk said that his wife was not at home (which indicates some misfortune in his marriage), while the actual cause of the conflict was that the drunk had refused his colleague’s invitation to play cards and denied being short of money (the other party offered to lend him money in order to keep him in the game, but this offer was rejected). Despite being so profoundly humiliated, he still strove to maintain his dignity to the end, insisting that he was a civilized person and identified as a worker.

The emphasis on (working class) identity and honor (meaning the past) is one example of how these plots reflect people’s attempts to locate things meaningful to the contemporary context. Works that depict the agony of losing one’s identity as a worker frequently make reference to this association. For example, in *Piano in a Factory* (dir. M Zhang, 2010), Chen Guilin—a steelworker—called his erstwhile colleagues to cast a steel piano as a way of honoring his vow to his daughter after his ex-wife wed a dealer of fake medications, hurting his dignity. In *The Long Season*, Wang Xiang attempts to save his identity problem in reality by upholding working-class morals. As Camus put it: “[...] the chain of daily gestures is broken [...] the heart vainly seeks the link that will connect it again” [1].

In addition to the persistence of past glory, this approach also includes the presentation of the development vision (meaning the future) of the individual (group). People deceive themselves by pinning their hopes on the future, thus depriving them of the meaning of the present. A Chinese chess game takes place in the middle section of “Rust” of *Tie Xi Qu*, during which some people in the scene express their views to the camera. One expressed his hopes that the next generation would study hard at school to avoid undergoing similar ordeals as the speaker (and the speaker’s parents) later in life. In the subsequent scene in a restaurant, a female cadre gives a speech. She likened the reorganization of the factory to the division of family property, cleverly using the analogy of her being the parent of workers to temporarily ease the mood of the others and make them look forward to the next year with optimism. This speech represents a high-sounding excuse for ordering the executor to achieve a teleological result. In the party scene in “Rust,” there is a moment in which a lady singing karaoke has chosen a political anthem. The lyrics of the song’s climax are as follows:

Ah, we are full of spirits and walk into that new era,
We sing *The East Is Red* and stand up as the masters,
We are telling *The Story of Spring* and getting rich in the reform and opening up,
The leader of the future will lead us into the new era,
holding high the banner will create the future. [25]

The lyrics refer to three critical political nodes in the political reform of the People’s Republic of China [26]. “The East is Red” is a reference to Mao Tse Tung’s revolution, and the resulting “stand

up as the masters” is a source of honor for the working class. “The Story of Spring” is the name of an anthem from the Deng Xiaoping era, when Chinese politics turned from the extreme left to pragmatism. “Getting rich” is the result of pragmatism, and this result rationalizes teleology in a similar way to Deng Xiaoping’s famous black or white cat dialectic [16]. Therefore, the “leader” will “lead us into the new era”.

The pompous approach of authority in a reality that fully contradicts good promises is reminiscent of a moment in the comedy film *Tracks Kong Lingxue* (dir. X. Zhang, 2011), in which Kong, as a teacher, gives a prose description of spring to his students from the stage. In fact, it is winter, and Kong is presenting a situation that is entirely untrue to reality. This ambiguous phrase implies that teacher authority is very vulnerable in the face of changing circumstances.

Whether it is the remembrance of former greatness or the weak hope for the future, they all address the same issue: trust. Faith is a concept that often produces contrast in films set in Northeast China’s post-industrial period. In another comedy, *Free and Easy* (dir. J Geng, 2016), a character pretending to be a monk asks, “Does faith still have appeal?” The solution to this question is answered in *The Long Season* when Wang’s displeasure erupted during a meeting where the leadership announced job cuts. Individualism gradually replaced collectivism in the Northeast’s post-industrial narrative. The contrast between *Tie Xi Qu*’s chess scenario and the karaoke scene demonstrates that in a post-industrial world, individualism makes sense while collectivism is deceiving. However, in the previous industrial age, this result was the exact opposite.

Films set in the post-industrial Northeastern context frequently address issues about death alongside irony. As a setting for the era, the creators are eager to establish a connection between homicide and the Northeast at the close of the previous century. The rise in popularity of films in the police/criminal genre in recent years demonstrates this connection. Prominent works besides *The Long Season* comprise the film noir *Black Coal, Thin Ice* (2014), and the television series *Burning Ice* (2017).

Camus holds that talking about others’ experience of death is just a substitute, considering it a “melancholy convention” [1] and that what is genuinely being feared is the absolute and inevitability of death. In the second part of *Tie Xi Qu* (the last story of Remains), a woman leads her whole family to their ancestor’s grave to pay homage after being forced by developers to move out of their street. However, they had to move their ancestor’s graves together before leaving. Her husband excavated the remains of the deceased mother from her tomb while her children and grandson watched from the sidelines. At the same time, she repeatedly told her dead mother-in-law why they were moving the grave as if she could be heard from the other world (if it exists). Camus refers to the fear of death because people understand that death is the end and because it is not convincing to discuss the death of others or the fictional world of the dead. Hence, in *Tie Xi Qu*, people can see this woman having a one-way conversation with the deceased in front of her children. It does not matter whether she believes this is effective communication. The important thing is that all the living people witnessing this event treat the dead person as a living person, which makes them temporarily forget the fear brought about by the absoluteness of death. After all, everyone had to face the significant changes taking place, which were forcibly disrupting their mechanically lived lives. When forced to think about the meaning of life, they feel emptiness or enter a state of despair. Camus believed that the most direct way to break this absurdity is through suicide, not just of a physical nature but also of a philosophical one; that is, after negating rationality and moving towards transcendence.

3 The revolt model in the context of northeastern post-industrial narrative

Camus posed the question, “Is one to die voluntarily or to hope in spite of everything” [1], and felt that active revolt was a better strategy for escaping absurdity than death itself. Any presentation of death in a non-police/non-criminal film will likely provoke death rather than inspire fear in the post-industrial narrative spectacle of the Northeast. For instance, Zhao, the main character, transports his colleague’s corpse as a prop in the 2007 road comedy film *Getting Home*. He sometimes dresses it up

like a drunk, sometimes ties it to a tire to make it easier to push, and other times, he pays someone to apply makeup to hide the body parts. Zhao travels and encounters an elderly guy who has hired someone to assist with his funeral arrangements in order to avoid being alone. Zhao does not act depressed when he builds a tomb for himself later on; rather, his actions of taking measurements and creating a suicide plan are humorous. The film's humorous death simulations support Camus's assertion that there is a confrontation "between man and his own obscurity" [1].

This comic persistence is also evident in the final section of *Tie Xi Qu*, "Rails," which mainly documents a parent named Old Du. Old Du's life can be described as a cosmic joke: he was first marked with shame because of his identity as a property owner, and then when his identity transformed into a great proletariat, he encountered national economic changes in his senior years and became a penniless person abandoned by society. This is Old Du's experience. He feels three layers of absurdity: the separation between "people and the world, people and themselves, and people and themselves" [7]. Although Old Du appears to be miserable in the documentary, dark humor that emerges from the juxtaposition between his life and the outside world. He appeared, nevertheless, to be merely trying to survive without putting up any revolt.

Although what occurred to Old Du is true, this reality stems from the mindset that pervades society in the post-industrial period. Old Du's negativity returns the matter to the point addressed in the opening of this essay, namely the self-comfort displayed in *Yelang Disco* lyrics. In most Northeastern post-industrial works, people (authors and characters) rarely investigate the roots of absurdity, instead viewing it as another reality. Many audio-visual works in the Northeastern environment highlight the absurdity and irony of identity transition. For example, the chorus of *Yelang Disco* reflects the hero's inner thoughts following a failed affair: "In this dimly lit tavern, I couldn't care less about the veracity of the situation." From this perspective, the cause for absurdity does not spark debate; instead, suggests a solution: confound worldviews and values through dualism. Another example, Wang Xiang, like the others in *The Long Season*, eventually lost his job and family. However, he does not reflect; even at the end of the film, Wang cries, "Don't look back," to the people on the train as it heads into the distance, avoiding tracing the origins of the tragedies.

4 Conclusion

In summary, the narrative context of post-industrial audio-visual works in the Northeast is characterized by the expression of real-life trauma through absurd methods. These works also exhibit cultural collage, nostalgia, and crisis of faith, exploring serious and noble themes such as authority and death. When confronted with absurdity, characters frequently abandon aggressive revolt and instead employ the same irresponsible ways in order to preserve themselves.

These works effectively portray the post-industrial landscape of Northeast China through its narrative and visual elements. This study highlights the post-industrial audio-visual work's role in capturing the socio-economic decline and its human impact, characterized by themes of absurdity and dislocation. The findings underscore the importance of visual media in documenting and interpreting socio-cultural transformations. Future research should investigate similar works in different geographical and industrial contexts to broaden people's understanding of China's post-industrial narratives. Additionally, exploring the impact of such works on public perception and policy could provide valuable insights into the role of media in shaping socio-political discourse.

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