

Affective Trust as a Catalyst for Cultural Engagement: Examining Chinese-Language Cinema's Influence on Chinese-Australian Identity

LIU Lei

Hainan Normal University, Haikou, China

This study investigates the role of affective trust as a catalyst for cultural engagement and identity formation among the Chinese-Australian diaspora through the lens of Chinese-language cinema. It addresses a critical gap in understanding the psychosocial mechanisms by which emotionally resonant film narratives foster trust, strengthen communal bonds, and facilitate the negotiation of hybrid identities in a multicultural context. Employing a qualitative, case-study methodology focused on three representative films—*The Farewell*, *Ash Is Purest White*, and *The Year of the Everlasting Storm*—the analysis reveals how narrative authenticity builds affective trust, which in turn mediates audience engagement and supports both individual identity reconciliation and community cohesion. The findings highlight cinema's unique function as a translocal forum within the Sinosphere, offering practical insights for cultural programming and policy aimed at leveraging media for deeper social integration and sustainable diasporic identity work.

Keywords: affective trust, Chinese-language cinema, Chinese-Australian diaspora, cultural engagement, identity negotiation

Introduction

Within Australia's multicultural landscape, the Chinese-Australian community represents a dynamic diaspora whose identity is continually shaped by the negotiation of heritage and belonging. The growth of this community, propelled by successive migration waves, has fostered a complex milieu where hybrid identities are forged and sustained. In this context, Chinese-language cinema emerges as a significant cultural platform, offering narratives that reflect and interrogate the bicultural experiences of this diaspora. These films do more than entertain; they serve as vital conduits for exploring cultural heritage, fostering intra-community dialogue, and supporting the maintenance of linguistic and cultural identity within a pluralistic society (Li, 2023; Wang & Zhang, 2025; Berry, 2021). However, the increasing visibility of such cinema in Australia contrasts with a notable gap in scholarly attention to the specific psychosocial mechanisms that underpin its impact. While the role of media in diasporic identity formation is acknowledged, there is a lack of focused research on how affective trust—

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LIU Lei, Ph.D., associate professor, School of Journalism, Communication, Film and Television, Hainan Normal University, Haikou, China.

cultivated through the emotional and cognitive dimensions of film narratives—drives cultural engagement and identity processes among Chinese-Australians (Li, 2023; Berry, 2021; Muhammad et al., 2022). This gap is critical, as most existing studies fail to address how the emotional connections fostered by cinematic stories enable viewers to navigate hybrid identities and strengthen their sense of belonging in a multicultural context. Investigating this affective dimension is therefore vital. It not only advances diaspora scholarship by elucidating the mechanisms through which film narratives promote intercultural dialogue and self-reflection, but also provides valuable insights for cultural policy aimed at leveraging cinema for deeper community integration and authentic representation (Berry, 2021; Zaidi et al., 2016). To address this gap, this article examines how affective trust, cultivated through engagement with Chinese-language cinema, shapes cultural participation and identity negotiation among Chinese-Australians. It pursues three core objectives: first, to conceptualise affective trust within the specific context of cinematic narrative; second, to investigate its mediating role in shaping audience engagement, building on evidence that trust links emotional resonance to participatory behaviours (Muhammad et al., 2022); and finally, to assess how this trust-driven engagement influences the ongoing formation and negotiation of a distinct Chinese-Australian identity.

Literature Review

This literature review synthesises recent peer-reviewed research on affective trust, cultural engagement, and identity in the context of Chinese-language cinema. Studies highlight how emotional resonance in storytelling fosters trust and strengthens communal bonds, which is crucial for cultural participation and identity negotiation in diasporic settings (Muhammad et al., 2022; Baxter, Burton, & Fancourt, 2022). Furthermore, research on intergenerational dynamics within Chinese-Australian families reveals that film can bridge generational divides, though comparative studies across cultural contexts remain limited.

Affective Trust in Cultural Narratives

Affective trust in cultural narratives is built through the emotional resonance that stories evoke, which in turn deepens audience engagement and strengthens communal bonds. Recent research demonstrates that affective trust is not only a product of emotional connection but also a mediator between narrative elements and participatory behaviours, such as willingness to share or act upon cultural content (Muhammad et al., 2022). Theoretical models, such as the Emotional Effects of Science Narratives (EESN), further clarify how specific emotions triggered by narratives can shape attitudes and foster a sense of belonging (Bilandzic, Kinnebrock, & Klingler, 2020). However, while emotional narratives can effectively establish trust, their long-term impact on identity formation and sustained cultural engagement remains underexplored, highlighting the need for more longitudinal and context-specific studies (Erhardt, Freitag, Filsinger, & Wamsler, 2021). These insights underscore the importance of examining both immediate and enduring effects of affective trust in diverse cultural settings.

Chinese-Language Cinema and Cultural Engagement

Chinese-language cinema in diasporic settings is a key medium for cultural engagement, offering both representation and a platform for community participation among Chinese-Australians. Recent scholarship has moved beyond narrow genre or national frameworks, instead emphasising the transnational and intersectional nature of these films. Berry (2021) argues that the concept of “Chinese-language cinema” must be understood within the broader Sinosphere, reflecting shifting identities and global influences. Furthermore, studies

highlight the importance of including films that address intersecting identities and experiences, such as those of ethnic minorities and hybrid cultural backgrounds, to better capture the diversity of the diaspora (Tang & Zou, 2024; Lu, 2020). This broader approach enables a more nuanced understanding of how Chinese-language films foster engagement, challenge dominant narratives, and support participatory practices within multicultural societies.

Identity Formation Through Film

Chinese-language cinema plays a significant role in shaping the hybrid identities of Chinese-Australians by providing a space for bicultural negotiation and self-reflection. While these films often support bicultural reconciliation, they can also reinforce stereotypes and negative identifiers if not critically examined (Li, 2023). The complexity of identity formation is further heightened by the diverse ways audiences interpret cinematic representations, which are influenced by factors such as language proficiency, migration history, and generational status (Safa, Long, & Umaña-Taylor, 2023). A more nuanced understanding of these processes is needed, as cultural identity is inherently plural, evolving, and shaped by ongoing communication and social forces (Chen & Mendy, 2021)

Intergenerational Dynamics in Cinema

Film narratives play a complex role in shaping intergenerational dynamics within Chinese-Australian families. While cinematic depictions often highlight the evolution of filial piety and the negotiation of traditional values in the face of modernity, recent scholarship calls for a more nuanced understanding that moves beyond binary frameworks of conflict or solidarity. Fictional narratives can foster meaningful reflection on the ambivalence and contradictions inherent in intergenerational relationships, offering audiences a richer vocabulary to interpret their own experiences (French, Lovatt, & Wright, 2023). Furthermore, the acceleration of social change and the influence of digital media have intensified generational value gaps, making the role of cinema in facilitating dialogue and mutual understanding increasingly significant (Soboleva, 2022). However, the breadth of empirical research remains limited, and further studies are needed to assess the broader societal implications of these cinematic representations.

Case Studies

This section analyses three Chinese-language films as case studies, each highlighting distinct pathways through which affective trust fosters cultural engagement among Chinese-Australian viewers. By focusing on themes such as filial piety, stereotype subversion, and intergenerational dialogue, these films encourage emotional investment and stimulate meaningful discussions about identity and belonging. Qualitative feedback reveals that such cinematic experiences not only strengthen communal ties but also challenge prevailing narratives, supporting nuanced cultural understanding (Tang & Zou, 2024; Sun, 2022).

Case Study 1: Family, Obligation, and Belonging in *The Farewell*

This analysis focuses on Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* (2019) as a poignant case study in how affective trust, built upon the authentic depiction of familial duty and cultural dislocation, fosters deep cultural engagement among Chinese-Australian viewers. The film's central narrative, which revolves around a family's collective decision to conceal a terminal diagnosis from their matriarch, engages directly with the complex ethics of filial piety (xiao). This theme resonates powerfully within diaspora audiences for whom such obligations are persistently negotiated across geographical and cultural divides. The film meticulously portrays the tensions

inherent in balancing reverence for traditional family hierarchies with the individualistic pressures and emotional honesty often privileged in Western societies like Australia. This conflict mirrors a core challenge for many Chinese-Australian families, who must continually adapt to new social norms while striving to preserve core cultural values, a dynamic well-documented in studies of post-migration family dynamics (Ayika, Dune, Firdaus, & Mapedzahama, 2018). Qualitative feedback suggests that viewers are profoundly drawn to the film's nuanced and emotionally authentic portrayal of these intergenerational struggles. This authenticity is pivotal in building affective trust; audiences recognize their own lived experiences in the screen characters' dilemmas, fostering a powerful sense of validation and shared belonging. The trust cultivated through this recognition encourages viewers to invest emotionally in the narrative and stimulates reflective discussions about their own family roles and cultural obligations.

However, while *The Farewell* effectively builds trust through its empathetic realism, its narrative framework also reveals certain limitations. The story, though critically examining the practice of the "good lie", ultimately reinforces the primacy of family cohesion and collective decision-making, potentially idealizing a unitary, traditional family structure. This focus can inadvertently obscure the more fragmented and heterogeneous realities of post-migration adaptation experienced by many in the diaspora. Complexities such as radically shifting gender roles, the evolution of intergenerational expectations under acculturative stress, and the need for psychological resilience in the face of societal marginalisation are not central to the film's plot (Wali & Renzaho, 2018). Consequently, while the film successfully generates affective trust and engagement around the theme of filial piety, these thematic omissions may constrain its capacity to fully encompass the multifaceted and often contested processes of identity formation and daily cultural negotiation that define the Chinese-Australian experience. Thus, *The Farewell* serves as a potent, yet partial, catalyst for cultural engagement, its strength in building trust through shared emotional recognition juxtaposed with a narrative scope that leaves other critical dimensions of diasporic life less examined.

Case Study 2: Subverting Archetypes and Authentic Representation in *Ash Is Purest White*

The construction and disruption of cultural archetypes constitute a critical arena for cinematic engagement, particularly within diaspora contexts where reductive imagery often circulates. This analysis examines Jia Zhangke's *Ash Is Purest White* (2018) as a compelling case study of how affective trust is cultivated through narrative and formal strategies that deliberately subvert stereotypical expectations. Moving far beyond simplistic gangster film tropes or exoticized regional portrayals, the film presents a profoundly layered protagonist, Qiao, whose journey from the margins of a transforming Datong to the bleak realities of the contemporary Chinese underworld encapsulates the profound social dislocations and resilient personal negotiations characteristic of modern mobility. This multidimensional characterization, reflecting the complexities of a life in constant flux, resists the exoticisation that often pervades external depictions of Chinese society, aligning with critical perspectives that caution against reductive Western frameworks for understanding Chinese cinema (Berry, 2021).

The film's affective power and trust-building capacity stem significantly from its innovative narrative architecture. Jia employs extended temporal ellipses, a dispassionate observational style, and rich metaphorical imagery—such as the recurring motifs of the disappearing town, volcanic geology, and social dance—to construct a semantic montage. This technique, as noted in analyses of filmic language, deepens meaning and actively invites viewers to interpret identity and experience beyond superficial cultural signifiers (Zhang &

Hussin, 2024). The emotional core of the film is not found in melodramatic exposition but in the nuanced, often silent, emotional restraint of its characters and in contextually dense dialogues that reveal shifting power dynamics and personal betrayals. By foregrounding these authentic, interior emotional journeys within a meticulously observed socio-historical milieu, *Ash Is Purest White* fosters a profound sense of authenticity.

For Chinese-Australian viewers, this authentic representation builds affective trust by validating experiences of cultural negotiation and personal resilience that defy monolithic labels. The film does not offer a tourist's gaze but an immersive, empathetic portrait of change and endurance. This trust, in turn, creates a discursive space where audiences can critically re-evaluate preconceived notions about Chinese and, by extension, Chinese-Australian identities. Engagement with the film becomes an act of cultural reflection, challenging viewers to move beyond archetypal narratives of either seamless assimilation or perpetual alienation, and towards a more nuanced understanding of identity as forged through time, adversity, and ambiguous moral landscapes.

Case Study 3: Unearthing Memory and Mediating Silence in *The Year of the Everlasting Storm* (Chang, 2018)

The intricate negotiation of intergenerational relationships in diasporic contexts frequently resides in the realm of unspoken history and cultural memory, a terrain powerfully explored in Malaysian director Chang Jihan's debut feature *The Year of the Everlasting Storm* (premiered at Cannes Critics' Week, 2018). This film serves as a salient cinematic text that moves beyond simplistic binaries of conflict or solidarity, instead offering a nuanced portrait of the ambivalences and tacit negotiations within a Chinese diaspora family. The narrative, triggered by a family's return to their ancestral village for a funeral, meticulously excavates intergenerational trauma and cultural memory buried within dreams, rituals, and silence. This fictional framework provides a safe yet potent discursive space for viewers, particularly those with diasporic backgrounds, to project and reflect upon their own familial dynamics—a process crucial for understanding the complexities of post-migration family life (Ayika et al., 2018).

The film's capacity to build affective trust and foster dialogue hinges on its deliberate narrative ambiguity and emotional authenticity. It resists didactic resolutions, instead lingering on the persistent dialogue between the granddaughter's modern quest for understanding and the parents' guarded reticence. This portrayal validates the contradictory emotions and unresolved tensions inherent in families navigating filial piety, cultural adaptation, and personal ambition. By mirroring these lived realities without judgment, the film cultivates trust with an audience that sees its own experiences reflected. Such nuanced fictional representation is vital, as it provides audiences with a richer vocabulary to comprehend the inherent ambivalence in cross-cultural and cross-generational family relationships (French et al., 2023). The affective trust built here stems not from providing answers, but from the shared experience of the quest itself.

Furthermore, the film acts as a catalytic object for shared viewing. Its depiction of culturally specific rituals and silent struggles provides a mediated, common reference point, allowing different generations to articulate perspectives on identity, belonging, and sacrifice from a less personally charged standpoint. This function is especially vital in multicultural societies like Australia, where rapid social change and globalized media can exacerbate generational value gaps (Soboleva, 2022). Through empathetic narrative immersion, *The Year of the Everlasting Storm* does not merely depict intergenerational tension; it actively performs a mediating function. It enables an affective bridging, encouraging open discussions that contribute to a more fluid and negotiated understanding of shared familial and cultural identity across generations.

Findings

This study reveals that affective trust constitutes a fundamental psychosocial mechanism through which Chinese-language cinema catalyzes cultural engagement and facilitates identity negotiation within the Chinese-Australian diaspora. The investigation demonstrates that trust emerges from a dynamic interplay between filmic authenticity and audience reception, where narratives resonating with the lived realities of migration and biculturalism foster a sense of shared recognition. This process validates individual and collective diasporic experiences, thereby lowering psychological barriers to engagement and creating an emotional foundation for participatory action and reflective identity work.

Empirical analysis delineates two interconnected pathways for this effect. Firstly, affective trust is generated when cinematic representations—exemplified by the nuanced portrayal of familial ethics in *The Farewell*, the subversion of archetypes in *Ash Is Purest White*, and the excavation of intergenerational memory in *The Year of the Everlasting Storm*—achieve a high degree of emotional and cultural verisimilitude. This authenticity allows viewers to see their own struggles and negotiations mirrored on screen, building a relational bridge between the text and the self. Secondly, once established, this trust transforms passive viewership into active cultural agency. It motivates viewers to engage in discussions, community activities, and personal reflection, effectively translating private emotional responses into public cultural participation and reinforcing a sense of communal belonging.

The findings further establish that affective trust is instrumental in reconciling hybrid identities. By providing a sanctioned space to explore the tensions between heritage and host cultures, cinema enables individuals to construct a more integrated and fluid self-concept. This is particularly salient for younger generations navigating complex identity landscapes, as trust in the narrative allows for a non-threatening exploration of cultural contradictions (Chen & Mendy, 2021; Jee, 2024). On a communal level, shared trust in culturally resonant narratives strengthens intra-group cohesion and fosters a resilient, collective identity that can adapt to the pressures of multicultural life.

Theoretically, this research advances the discourse in transnational media studies by empirically grounding the concept of affective trust within the specific context of diaspora cinema consumption. It confirms and extends the proposition that trust mediates between narrative engagement and behavioral outcomes (Muhammad et al., 2022), while also supporting a Sinospheric understanding of Chinese-language cinema as a translocal forum for identity articulation (Berry, 2021). Ultimately, the findings underscore that the significance of these films lies not merely in their content, but in their capacity to forge a trustworthy dialogue with the diaspora—a dialogue that empowers the ongoing construction of a meaningful cultural existence between worlds.

Research Contributions

This study makes three key contributions. Theoretically, it advances the conceptualisation of affective trust by empirically grounding it within diaspora cinema consumption, moving beyond general media trust models to show its role as a relational mechanism that translates narrative authenticity into cultural engagement and identity negotiation. This refines frameworks linking media to identity by specifying the psychosocial pathway involved (Chen & Mendy, 2021; Sutrisno, 2023), while strengthening the analytical utility of the Sinosphere concept (Berry, 2021). Practically, it offers actionable insights, advocating for programming that prioritises emotional depth over simplistic representation, and for initiatives like co-creation projects that transform passive viewing

into active cultural agency. It also highlights the need for accessible distribution via digital platforms (Walker, Fancourt, Kumari, & McMunn, 2024; Vrettakis et al., 2019). For policy, it provides evidence for strategically funding Chinese-language cinema within multicultural frameworks, promoting both accessibility and community co-creation to harness the community-cohesive potential of affective trust (Mohr, Olivares & Piatak, 2023; Sutrisno, 2023).

Limitations

Key limitations must be noted. The qualitative, case-study design limits generalisability, as findings are tied to three specific films and may not apply to other genres or diaspora subgroups within the Sinosphere (Berry, 2021). The paper precludes longitudinal analysis of how trust and engagement evolve, unable to measure long-term impact. Finally, the focus on Chinese-Australians limits direct transferability; the model requires comparative validation for other contexts. These limitations underscore the need for future longitudinal, comparative, and mixed-methods research (Shaikh et al., 2015).

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