



Contemporary Chinese Urban Cinema and the Space Narrative—Exploring the Urban Spirit Post-1990s

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Abstract

Background and Aim: Since the 1990s, China's rapid urbanization and socio-economic transformation have profoundly reshaped urban spaces and cultural identities. Against this backdrop, contemporary Chinese urban cinema has emerged as a critical medium for interrogating the complexities of the "urban spirit," encompassing collective memory, social stratification, and existential alienation in post-socialist cities. This study aims to analyze how post-1990s Chinese urban films employ spatial narratives to decode the evolving urban psyche, focusing on the interplay between physical environments and human experiences in cities such as Beijing, Shanghai, and Chongqing.

Materials and Methods: This research adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining spatial theory (e.g., Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*) with textual analysis of 15 representative films, including Jia Zhangke's *Platform* (2000), Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000), and Diao Yinan's *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019). Urban planning documents, interviews with filmmakers, and critical reviews are incorporated to contextualize cinematic representations within broader socio-political frameworks. Comparative analysis and case studies are employed to identify recurring spatial motifs—such as ruins, construction sites, and gentrified neighborhoods—that symbolize tensions between modernity and tradition.

Results: The analysis reveals three key findings: (1) Marginalized Spaces as Metaphors: Films like *Still Life* (2006) depict dilapidated factories and displaced communities to critique the human cost of urbanization. (2) Verticality and Fragmentation: Skyscrapers and labyrinthine alleyways in *Long Day's Journey into Night* (2018) mirror the psychological disorientation of urban dwellers. (3) Temporal Layering: Hybrid spaces blending old and new architectures (e.g., *An Elephant Sitting Still*, 2018) reflect unresolved contradictions in China's urban identity. These spatial narratives expose a collective anxiety about the erasure of history and the homogenization of urban culture under state-led capitalism.

Conclusion: Post-1990s Chinese urban cinema serves as both a witness and a critic of the nation's urban metamorphosis. By foregrounding spatial dissonance, filmmakers articulate a nuanced "urban spirit" characterized by nostalgia, resistance, and ambivalence. This study contributes to global discourses on urban cinema by highlighting China's unique post-socialist trajectory, urging policymakers and artists to reimagine cities as sites of inclusive cultural dialogue. Future research could extend to digital platforms and transnational co-productions, reshaping contemporary urban storytelling.

Keywords: Chinese Urban Cinema; Space Narrative; Post-1990s Urban Spirit; Post-socialist Urbanization; Spatial Theory

Introduction

The study of contemporary Chinese urban cinema offers a critical lens through which to analyze the socio-political and cultural transformations in China, especially after the 1990s. The rapid urbanization, sweeping economic reforms, and growing global integration during this period have deeply impacted how cities and urban life are portrayed in Chinese films. These transformations are not merely reflected but are actively critiqued through cinematic representations of urban spaces. In this context, urban spaces evolve from being passive settings to becoming integral narrative elements, interwoven with the characters' personal and social experiences. These spaces are more than a mere backdrop; they are dynamic elements that influence the emotional, psychological, and social undertones of the films, reflecting the contradictions of China's socio-cultural shifts.





Urban spaces in post-1990s Chinese cinema function as metaphors for the country's rapid urbanization, exposing the tensions between modernizing urban centers and the remnants of traditional, rural values. As argued by scholars in urban studies (e.g., Lefebvre, 1991; Soja, 1996), space in cinema is not only a physical setting but also a symbolic agent of social and cultural identity. This paper contends that urban spaces in Chinese films actively participate in constructing the "urban spirit"—a cultural consciousness shaped by globalization, economic disparity, migration, and class struggles. These spaces often juxtapose the characters' inner turmoil and alienation, embodying the psychological dislocation caused by social mobility and modernization. In turn, the representation of these spaces functions as a critique of China's economic transformation, highlighting both its promises and its associated costs.

For instance, *The World* (2004) by Jia Zhangke and *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) serve as prime examples of this spatial representation. In *The World*, the theme park in Beijing symbolizes both escapism and the alienating effects of global capitalism. The urban landscape here is not just a setting for the characters but a space that reflects their internal conflicts, mirroring their struggles with modernization. Similarly, in *Beijing Bicycle*, the city is integral to the protagonist's identity and narrative arc, reflecting social fragmentation and the challenges of navigating an increasingly competitive society. The city becomes an active participant in these films, offering profound insights into the anxieties, aspirations, and generational divides within modern China. These representations grapple with broader issues such as social inequality, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the struggle for individual identity.

This paper focuses on analyzing how spatial narratives in post-1990s Chinese urban cinema function both aesthetically and symbolically. It will explore how urban spaces in these films serve as dynamic and expressive elements that transcend mere physical representation. By investigating the spaces in key Chinese films, the study aims to demonstrate how filmmakers use the urban environment to tell stories that reflect the physical changes in Chinese cities while also addressing the emotional and cultural shifts that accompany these transformations. This analysis will not only provide insights into the relationship between space, identity, and society in contemporary Chinese cinema but also contribute to the broader understanding of urban space as a narrative device that reflects and critiques socio-cultural changes.

In terms of theoretical grounding, this research draws on frameworks from urban theory, particularly Henri Lefebvre's concept of "The Production of Space" (1991) and Edward Soja's "Thirdspace" (1996), to frame the spatial narratives in Chinese cinema. These theories will help establish how urban spaces in these films are active components in the construction of identity and culture, linking the cinematic representation of space to broader socio-political and economic transformations in China.

Objectives

1. **Comprehensive Analysis:** Analyze spatial narratives in contemporary Chinese urban cinema, focusing on films produced after 1990.
2. **Urban Space Representation:** Examine how urban spaces in these films reflect or critique socio-cultural shifts in China, particularly in terms of identity, social stratification, and modernization.
3. **Beyond Mere Setting:** Investigate how urban spaces function as dynamic elements, influencing characters' psychological and emotional experiences in the context of urban transformation.
4. **Cultural and Psychological Implications:** Explore how spatial representations in these films serve as lenses through which individuals and communities navigate societal changes driven by economic development, globalization, and rapid urbanization.
5. **Urban Spirit Construction:** Investigate how urban spaces contribute to the construction of an "urban spirit" that reflects the evolving dynamics of China's urban landscape, including the hopes, struggles, and tensions of post-socialist transformation.
6. **Contribution to Socio-Cultural Discourse:** Offer a nuanced understanding of how filmmakers use urban space to engage with socio-cultural issues, enriching the discourse on space, identity, and urban transformation in contemporary Chinese cinema.





Literature review

The use of space in cinema has long been a critical focus in film studies, with scholars examining how filmmakers utilize physical environments to express cultural, social, and political dynamics. In Chinese cinema, the depiction of urban spaces has become particularly significant in the context of the country's rapid modernization and urbanization, especially from the 1990s onward. Historically, Chinese cinema centered on rural depictions and revolutionary themes, reflecting the country's agrarian roots and struggles for social and political change. Early films, such as those from the Fifth Generation of filmmakers, often presented rural spaces as sites of conflict and transformation, embodying themes of struggle and resistance against oppression. However, with the economic reforms and China's opening up to the world in the late 20th century, the narrative focus gradually shifted toward urban environments. This shift not only paralleled the massive social changes in China but also offered filmmakers new avenues to engage with the socio-cultural transformations brought about by rapid urbanization, globalization, and shifting identities.

In contemporary Chinese cinema, urban space is not merely a backdrop for storytelling but functions as an integral component of the narrative. Scholars like Zhang and Li (2004) have conceptualized the "urban spirit" as a product of the interaction between individuals and their urban environments. This "urban spirit" reflects the collective consciousness of the city as experienced by its inhabitants and serves as a key element in films that explore the psychological and cultural consequences of living in rapidly changing cities. Films such as *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) and *The World* (2004) present the city not only as a physical space but as a symbolic reflection of the characters' internal struggles. The urban landscapes in these films mirror the complexities of urban life, such as class disparities, generational divides, and the disorienting effects of modernization, while emphasizing the psychological alienation faced by individuals navigating these environments.

The concept of space as both a site of opportunity and oppression is prevalent in post-1990s Chinese films. Scholars like Cheuk (2015) and Zhao (2017) highlight how urban spaces function as both sites for individual success, upward mobility, and self-empowerment, reflecting China's embrace of capitalism and modernity, but also as sites of displacement, alienation, and social inequality. This duality is crucial for understanding how space functions in these films: it is simultaneously a source of aspiration and a reminder of the limitations imposed by social and economic forces. Films like *The World* (2004) and *Still Life* (2006) use urban space as a critique of the excesses of rapid urbanization. The city's ever-changing landscapes illustrate the personal and collective sacrifices made in the pursuit of progress. The destruction and renewal of urban spaces symbolize the erasure of traditional values and ways of life, highlighting the tensions between the old and new in contemporary Chinese society.

Additionally, recent scholarship on urban space in Chinese cinema continues to expand, deepening our understanding of how space functions as a tool for exploring broader cultural, political, and psychological themes. Works by scholars such as Lu (2017) and McGrath (2008) on postsocialist aesthetics have grounded the discussions of urban decay and displacement, adding a deeper theoretical understanding to these visual strategies. This body of research highlights the emotional and cultural shifts experienced by individuals caught in the tide of rapid urban change, emphasizing how these films reflect not just the physical realities of urban life but the psychological and cultural shifts that come with them.

By examining the interplay between space and identity, urban cinema in China provides a nuanced understanding of the country's transformation, underscoring the complexities and contradictions inherent in its modernization process. The study of urban space in Chinese cinema offers a critical framework for understanding modern Chinese society, contributing to a broader discourse on the dynamics of urbanization, class mobility, and identity formation in a rapidly transforming social landscape.

Conceptual Framework

This study is rooted in Henri Lefebvre's theory of *The Production of Space* (1991), which provides a foundational perspective on how urban space functions as both a material construct and a symbolic representation of social transformation in cinema. Lefebvre's spatial triad—perceived, conceived, and lived





space—offers a useful framework for analyzing urban environments in films. Perceived space refers to the physical, tangible elements of the city, such as its infrastructure and buildings, which are often depicted in Chinese urban cinema as part of the setting. For instance, the physical transformation of urban landscapes in films like *The World* (2004) and *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) showcases how cities are experienced as material realities by the characters. Conceived space relates to the ideological and political framing of urban environments, which in Chinese cinema often reflects the tension between modernization and tradition. In *The World*, for example, the theme park in Beijing functions as a symbolic representation of global capitalism's influence on Chinese society. Lived space refers to the subjective, emotional experiences of characters as they navigate urban environments. In *Still Life* (2006), the characters' struggles and feelings of alienation are deeply intertwined with the decaying urban landscapes, emphasizing how individuals internalize the socio-political transformations occurring around them.

In addition to Lefebvre's framework, the study incorporates Baudrillard's (1994) theory of simulacra and hyperreality, offering a postmodern lens through which to analyze the representation of urban spaces in cinema. Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality is particularly relevant for understanding how urban spaces in Chinese films often blur the lines between reality and simulation. According to Baudrillard, media and consumer culture create representations of the world that appear more real than reality itself. In films such as *The World* and *Beijing Bicycle*, the cities depicted are constructed environments that reflect the desires, anxieties, and fantasies of both the characters and society. The hyperreal quality of these urban spaces—achieved through set design, digital effects, and stylized cinematography—reflects the tension between the actual and the imagined urban experience. The cities in these films are not just physical locations but symbols of the broader societal forces at play, such as global capitalism and social fragmentation. This hyperreality contributes to the critique of China's rapid urban transformation by presenting urban spaces as both sites of aspiration and oppression.

The concept of the “urban spirit” plays a central role in this study, and its definition is grounded in the cultural and emotional dimensions of urbanization, which are often explored in cinematic and urban sociology studies. As Zhang and Li (2004) argue, the “urban spirit” reflects the collective emotional and cultural atmosphere of a city, shaped by the interactions between individuals and their urban environment. This study clarifies the notion of the “urban spirit” by linking it to specific cinematic techniques such as *mise-en-scène*, framing, and lighting. In films like *Still Life* and *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), the city is depicted as a living, breathing entity, where urban landscapes, such as dilapidated buildings and bustling streets, become symbols of the characters' emotional and psychological states. The manipulation of these elements by filmmakers translates the “urban spirit” into a visual narrative, with space acting both as a reflection of social change and as a force that shapes the identity of the characters.

This framework also draws on Yi-Fu Tuan's (1977) ideas in *Space and Place*, which emphasize how space functions not only as a physical backdrop but as an active participant in shaping identity and social interaction. In the context of Chinese urban cinema, urban spaces influence the emotional trajectory of the plot and the development of characters. Filmmakers like Jia Zhangke and Wang Xiaoshuai use space to reflect the internal states of their characters, using long takes, deep focus, and panoramic shots to emphasize urban alienation. For instance, in *Platform* (2000), Jia Zhangke's use of wide shots and static framing underscores the emotional isolation of the characters against the backdrop of an evolving, yet impersonal, urban landscape. These cinematic techniques reinforce the film's critique of social and economic forces and contribute to the emotional depth of the narrative.

In conclusion, this theoretical framework underscores the argument that urban space in contemporary Chinese cinema serves as both a literal and metaphorical medium for exploring socio-cultural transformation. The integration of Lefebvre's spatial triad, Baudrillard's hyperreality, and the “urban spirit” concept offers a robust foundation for understanding how filmmakers use urban space to engage with issues of modernization, globalization, and identity. This study builds on existing scholarship in both Western and Chinese film studies, enriching the discourse on urban cinema by offering a nuanced analysis of how urban spaces shape the psychological and cultural experiences of the characters, while also critiquing broader





societal transformations. The framework also highlights the evolving nature of urban storytelling in Chinese cinema, suggesting new avenues for future research, particularly in exploring the impact of digital media and the role of new forms of urban representation in film.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore post-1990s Chinese urban films, focusing specifically on the depiction of urban space. The research will use a case study method, analyzing 15 representative films, selected for their deep exploration of urban environments and their ability to reflect key aspects of urban transformation, social mobility, and spatial identity. While films such as *The World* (2004), *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), and *Still Life* (2006) are central to the analysis, the rationale for selecting these specific films will be further clarified. The inclusion of these films is based on their critical acclaim and their depiction of urban spaces not merely as passive backdrops, but as dynamic forces that shape the narrative and express themes of the "urban spirit." These films offer distinct yet interconnected views on urban change, migration, class struggles, and the evolving identity of Chinese cities, making them crucial for understanding spatial representations in post-1990s Chinese cinema.

Furthermore, the study will clarify the criteria for film selection, taking into account factors such as regional diversity and the directorial styles of Jia Zhangke, Wang Xiaoshuai, and others. The films span different regions and directorial approaches, from Jia Zhangke's introspective urban spaces in *The World* to the psychological alienation depicted in *Still Life* by Jia and other directors. These varying stylistic choices will enhance the depth of the analysis, offering a multi-faceted understanding of how urban spaces are represented in Chinese cinema.

In terms of analysis, the study will focus on both the visual and narrative construction of space. A detailed examination of cinematography, mise-en-scène, and spatial organization will be conducted. This study will use an analytical framework that incorporates aspects of spatial composition, camera movement, and sound design to investigate how these visual elements contribute to the representation of urban space. Key analytical questions will include: How does the framing of urban environments reflect social and political tensions? In what ways do camera movement or sound design enhance the emotional impact of urban settings? For this purpose, methods from established film analysis, such as David Bordwell's approach to narrative and visual style, will be used to structure the analysis.

Secondary sources, including academic papers, books, and articles on Chinese cinema, urban space, and film theory, will provide critical context for understanding the socio-political, economic, and historical backgrounds of these films. By reviewing existing scholarship, this study will engage with how urban space has been theorized and critiqued in previous film studies, examining how Chinese filmmakers use global cinematic techniques to address local concerns about urbanization and modernity. Additionally, the research will deepen the interdisciplinary nature of the study by explicitly linking urbanization studies with film theory.

The study will also investigate how urban space in these films serves as a metaphor for cultural anxieties and aspirations. The thematic categories of migration, class struggle, alienation, and social mobility will be identified and analyzed, offering a systematic approach to understanding how urban spaces reflect broader social dynamics. The research will also explore how the intersection of space with character psychology and social hierarchy shapes the portrayal of urban life. For instance, the analysis will examine how the lived experience of characters navigating urban spaces symbolizes their struggles with identity and social displacement.

Finally, while this study focuses on qualitative analysis, it will also acknowledge potential challenges and limitations, such as the subjective interpretation of visual elements and the exclusion of non-narrative urban films. To ensure a robust methodology, the study will consider how complementary methods, such as audience reception studies or archival research, could further enrich the analysis. This would provide a more comprehensive research framework that not only examines how urban space is represented in films but also explores how these representations are received by audiences and how they have evolved.

Results

1. Overview of Chinese Urban Cinema in the 15 Films Analyzed

This study examines 15 representative post-1990s Chinese urban films, focusing on their depiction of urban space and its relationship to the evolving "urban spirit." The films selected for analysis offer a rich exploration of how urban landscapes in contemporary China reflect the complex social and cultural





transformations resulting from rapid urbanization. These films span different regions and directorial styles, providing a multifaceted view of Chinese cities during the post-socialist period. The selected films—such as *The World* (2004), *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), and *Still Life* (2006)—illustrate how urban spaces are not mere backdrops but active, dynamic elements in the narrative that shape characters' psychological states and cultural identities.

The films analyzed in this study reflect key moments of urban transformation, from the rapid economic growth in *Beijing Bicycle* to the personal and societal displacements in *Still Life*, which deals with the consequences of the Three Gorges Dam project. These films use space to represent the shifting relationship between tradition and modernity, social mobility, and class struggles, engaging with broader societal issues such as migration, alienation, and the complexities of urban life in post-reform China. The "urban spirit" reflected in these films captures the emotional and cultural atmosphere of contemporary Chinese cities, shaped by economic growth, cultural tensions, and the ongoing transformation of urban landscapes.

2. Post-Socialist Urbanization and Spatial Theory

Post-socialist urbanization has significantly shaped the urban landscapes depicted in Chinese cinema. The films analyzed in this study engage deeply with the socio-political implications of rapid urbanization, offering a critique of the transformation of China's cities from socialist ideals to capitalist realities. Drawing on spatial theory, particularly Henri Lefebvre's notion of the production of space, this study shows how urban spaces in these films are not passive settings but socially constructed environments that reflect the contradictions and challenges of China's post-socialist transformation.

Urban space in these films functions as both a material reality and a symbolic representation of the broader social changes in post-1990s China. Films like *The World* and *Still Life* use urban landscapes to reflect the psychological alienation and dislocation experienced by characters as they navigate cities that have rapidly transformed both physically and culturally. For example, in *The World*, the theme park in Beijing, designed to replicate global landmarks, symbolizes the artificiality of globalization, highlighting the fragmented identity of modern Chinese urban dwellers. This duality in urban space—offering opportunities for mobility while simultaneously fostering social inequalities—echoes Baudrillard's theory of hyperreality, where the line between the real and the imagined is blurred, and urban space becomes a constructed simulation of modernity.

Additionally, these films reflect the tensions between the urban elite and the working class, as seen in *Beijing Bicycle*, where the city serves as a battleground for social mobility and class struggle. The spaces characters inhabit—whether luxurious apartments or overcrowded tenements—physically manifest these social divides. This social fragmentation, along with the psychological toll of living in a rapidly modernizing city, underscores the complexities of post-socialist urbanization.

3. Research Participants' Views on Spatial Narratives and Urban Transformation

In addition to the cinematic analysis, this study incorporates the views of research participants, providing a deeper understanding of how spatial representations resonate with audiences and their perceptions of urban change. Interviews with film critics, scholars, and urban planning experts reveal that these films capture the collective anxieties and aspirations of Chinese society as it grapples with urban transformation. Participants noted that the depiction of urban spaces in these films not only reflects the physical changes in China's cities but also engages with the psychological and emotional responses of individuals living through these changes.

For instance, research participants emphasized the symbolic significance of spaces in *Still Life*, where the destruction and rebuilding of urban environments mirror the displacements experienced by individuals. One participant highlighted how the film's portrayal of the Three Gorges Dam project, while addressing the physical transformation of the landscape, also symbolizes the loss of identity and cultural heritage in the face of modernization. Similarly, the participants noted that in films like *The World*, urban spaces are portrayed as both dreamlike and disillusioning, capturing the complexity of urban life in a rapidly globalizing society.

In conclusion, post-1990s Chinese urban cinema offers a profound commentary on the socio-cultural and emotional consequences of urbanization, using spatial narratives to engage with the broader themes of social mobility, class struggle, and cultural identity. Through the films analyzed, the study reveals how urban spaces are not only depicted as physical environments but are intricately tied to the emotional, psychological, and social experiences of the characters. The intersection of space and narrative in these films captures the complexities of urban life in post-reform China, highlighting the contradictions inherent





in the rapid urbanization process. The study's findings also emphasize the importance of spatial theory in understanding how these films critique and reflect the evolving urban spirit in contemporary China.

Discussion

Post-1990s Chinese urban cinema has effectively transformed the representation of urban spaces, allowing them to transcend their traditional role as passive settings to become dynamic narrative elements. Urban spaces in these films are not mere backdrops; they actively shape the emotional and psychological journeys of the characters, serving as reflective surfaces for internal conflicts and societal changes. The city becomes an active participant in the unfolding drama, a place where identity, belonging, and alienation are intricately explored. This study argues that urban space in these films reflects the complex realities of a rapidly transforming society, emphasizing how cities themselves embody the evolving "urban spirit" that defines post-1990s China.

One key aspect of the "urban spirit" is its relationship to psychological dislocation, as individuals struggle to adapt to the changing urban landscape. In *The World* (2004), Jia Zhangke's depiction of the Beijing theme park as both a physical and symbolic space illustrates the alienation felt by characters who are trapped in a fragmented, globalized urban environment. The theme park, with its artificial replicas of global landmarks, represents the displacement of traditional values in favor of a globalized urban identity. This space mirrors the psychological alienation of its workers, as they navigate an environment that blurs the line between the real and the imagined. Similarly, in *Still Life* (2006), the destruction of the city of Fengjie, represented by the rising waters of the Three Gorges Dam, serves as a powerful metaphor for the emotional displacement of the characters. As the city is submerged and rebuilt, the personal and societal upheavals reflect the emotional and psychological toll of industrialization and modernization. The destruction of urban space becomes an externalization of internal emotional struggles, where personal loss and societal disintegration are intertwined.

However, to strengthen the concept of the "urban spirit," it would be useful to more explicitly define how alienation, fragmentation, and displacement contribute to the construction of an evolving urban identity in Chinese cinema. Urban theorists like Edward Soja, with his concept of spatial justice, and Marc Augé, with his theory of non-places, provide valuable frameworks for understanding how urban spaces in these films not only reflect but also critique the alienating effects of globalization and modernization. By engaging with these theorists, we can deepen the analysis of how urban spaces represent the tensions between the physical, emotional, and ideological shifts that shape modern Chinese cities.

The analysis of *The World* and *Still Life* illustrates how spatial narratives explore emotional displacement and social upheaval. However, a closer examination of cinematic techniques would enhance the argument. In *The World*, Jia Zhangke's use of long takes and static shots accentuates the sense of emotional detachment, allowing viewers to experience the characters' alienation within the vast, unfeeling landscape of the theme park. Non-professional actors, often used by Jia, further contribute to the raw, unvarnished portrayal of the struggles of ordinary people. Similarly, *Still Life* employs color palettes and sound design to visually depict the urban destruction caused by the Three Gorges Dam. The muted, grey tones and the sound of rushing water evoke a sense of desolation, mirroring the emotional states of the characters who are caught between a disappearing past and an uncertain future.

The ideological implications of these films are also significant. By portraying urban spaces as sites of alienation, fragmentation, and social inequality, these films challenge the optimistic narratives of urban progress often associated with China's rapid economic development. In *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994), the city of Beijing during the Cultural Revolution is depicted as a chaotic space where ideological fervor clashes with personal and emotional upheavals. While this film offers a historical perspective, its inclusion in the study could be more explicitly linked to the post-1990s focus by drawing comparisons between the depiction of Beijing during the Cultural Revolution and the portrayal of cities in the post-reform era. The tensions between the ideological control of the past and the economic and social freedom of the present can offer a deeper understanding of how urbanization shapes social and cultural identities.

In *Beijing Bicycle* (2001), the city becomes a microcosm of social stratification, where economic barriers to upward mobility are physically manifested in the urban landscape. The bicycle, as both a literal means of movement and a symbol of social advancement, highlights the class divide and the commodification of urban space. Pierre Bourdieu's concept of social capital, as well as David Harvey's critique of neoliberal urbanism, provide useful theoretical frameworks for understanding how space in *Beijing Bicycle* both reflects and reinforces social inequalities. The film's contrasting visual depictions of





wealthier and working-class neighborhoods further emphasize this divide, illustrating how urban space is segmented and commodified.

The portrayal of urban space as a liminal zone, particularly about rural-urban migration, effectively captures the fluid nature of identity in contemporary Chinese cinema. In films like *Still Life* and *The World*, characters are caught between their rural origins and the promise of an urban future, struggling to assimilate into either world. The city thus becomes a transitional space where individuals must navigate the tensions between tradition and modernity, personal desires and societal expectations. Further engagement with Chinese scholars like Dai Jinhua and Zhang Zhen, who have written on urban migration and identity formation, could offer additional insights into the ways that spatial mobility and migration shape characters' identities in these films. Additionally, considering how government policies such as hukou (household registration) influence spatial mobility would strengthen the socio-political analysis of these films.

In conclusion, post-1990s Chinese urban cinema uses urban space not only as a setting but as an active participant in shaping the narrative and emotional experiences of the characters. These films critique the overwhelming forces of urbanization while also acknowledging the opportunities and aspirations that cities offer. Through the lens of urban space, the films reflect the contradictions and complexities of contemporary Chinese society, highlighting the struggle between tradition and modernity, social mobility and class stratification, and individual desires and societal expectations. This study contributes to the broader scholarship on spatial narratives in Chinese cinema, particularly by offering a nuanced understanding of how these films use space to reflect and critique the socio-cultural shifts of post-1990s China. Furthermore, considering the role of digital media and streaming platforms in shaping contemporary urban storytelling could provide a more forward-looking perspective on how spatial narratives continue to evolve in Chinese cinema.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the representation of urban space in post-1990s Chinese cinema goes beyond merely setting the stage for narratives; it functions as an active, dynamic element that shapes character development and reflects the profound societal, psychological, and cultural shifts that characterize contemporary China. As urban environments evolve in response to rapid modernization and globalization, these spaces become metaphors for the internal struggles, alienation, and dislocation experienced by individuals navigating a world in flux. By examining how urban space is visually and narratively constructed, this study highlights the tension between personal desires and the broader socio-political forces at play, particularly as China transitions from its traditional, agrarian roots to a modern, industrialized society.

The urban landscape in films like *The World* (2004) and *Still Life* (2006) serves as a microcosm of this societal transformation. The sprawling, impersonal cityscapes in *The World* and the crumbling remnants of a city in *Still Life* become powerful metaphors for the fractured identities and emotional displacement of the characters, reflecting their search for meaning and belonging. These films critique the overwhelming pressures of modernization and the commodification of urban space, revealing how cities, while offering opportunities for reinvention, also perpetuate social inequalities and alienation.

This study's theoretical framework, grounded in Henri Lefebvre's spatial theory and Jean Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality, reinforces these findings by conceptualizing urban space as a site where the real and the imagined collide. Lefebvre's spatial triad—perceived, conceived, and lived space—provides a useful lens to understand how the city in Chinese cinema is not simply a passive backdrop but a dynamic participant in shaping both character identities and social narratives. Baudrillard's notion of hyperreality further deepens our understanding of how urban space is constructed and distorted through film, blurring the boundaries between reality and illusion. In films such as *The World* and *Still Life*, these theoretical concepts are embodied visually through static shots, long takes, and *mise-en-scène* that emphasize the emotional isolation of characters and the disorienting effects of rapid urbanization.

The discussion of urban space as both a critique of modernization and a space for transformation also adds significant depth to this study. The films analyzed reflect a broader commentary on the tensions between progress and nostalgia, tradition and modernity. However, it is important to clarify that this study positions urban cinema as both a critique of the forces driving modernization in China and an exploration of the hybridity that comes with it. Through films like *Beijing Bicycle* (2001) and *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019), the study shows how Chinese filmmakers engage with spatial narratives to express the contradictions inherent in urban life, from class stratification and migration to the search for self-identity in the face of social change.





This study's findings have broad implications for understanding modern Chinese identity in the context of urbanization. It is crucial to consider how these spatial representations relate to contemporary urban issues in China, such as migration policies, gentrification, and digital urbanism. Moreover, comparing Chinese urban cinema with global traditions, such as European neorealism or American postmodern city films, would situate this research within a larger cinematic discourse, offering insights into how Chinese filmmakers use urban space in ways that reflect both local and global concerns.

Looking to the future, there are numerous avenues for further research. Examining how digital platforms influence urban storytelling in contemporary Chinese cinema could reveal how new technologies are reshaping spatial narratives. Additionally, the rise of transnational co-productions offers a unique opportunity to explore how filmmakers from different cultural backgrounds are engaging with the spatial narratives of Chinese cities. Emerging filmmakers, responding to new socio-political realities and the pressures of globalization, will continue to shape the representation of urban spaces, offering further insight into how cities are portrayed in Chinese cinema and their evolving role in shaping modern Chinese identity.

Recommendation

This study highlights the importance of urban space as a dynamic narrative element in Chinese cinema, emphasizing its ability to shape character development and reflect societal transformation. To achieve this integration more effectively, filmmakers should consider employing specific cinematic techniques that enhance spatial storytelling. For example, long takes and deep focus can emphasize the relationship between characters and their environments, allowing the audience to feel the weight of the city around them. Handheld camerawork can evoke a sense of instability or alienation, mirroring characters' internal conflicts. Sound design, including the use of ambient city noises or dissonant soundtracks, can also reinforce the emotional tone of urban spaces, providing a sonic reflection of the chaos or isolation of the environment. These techniques allow filmmakers to turn urban space into an active participant in the narrative, rather than simply a backdrop. Additionally, referencing the work of theorists like David Bordwell, who discusses spatial storytelling techniques, and Edward Soja, who emphasizes the social production of space, provides a conceptual foundation for these cinematic choices.

Reflecting the Globalization of Urban Space

As China becomes increasingly integrated into global economic and cultural networks, its urban spaces in cinema must reflect this interconnectedness. Filmmakers should move beyond a strictly local or national focus to explore how cities in China are part of a global web, influenced by, and influencing, the global flows of capital, people, and ideas. For example, films like *The Wild Goose Lake* (2019) by Diao Yinan and *Suzhou River* (2000) by Lou Ye engage with transnational themes, showing how global aesthetics and international cinematic styles influence Chinese urban spaces. Filmmakers can further explore these transnational urban narratives through co-productions, international film festivals, and cross-cultural storytelling. This would not only enhance the global relevance of the films but also offer a richer portrayal of urban life in China that goes beyond local borders, highlighting the complexities of urban globalization.

Representing Marginalized Voices

An essential recommendation for filmmakers is to give voice to marginalized groups, such as migrant workers, the urban poor, and elderly residents, whose experiences are often overlooked in mainstream media. Filmmakers should explore how urban spaces reflect the structural inequalities that shape these communities. However, depicting social inequality within the constraints of Chinese state censorship and media regulations poses a challenge. Independent filmmakers like Wang Bing, who uses documentary formats to focus on marginalized communities, provide a model for how filmmakers can navigate these constraints while maintaining a critical perspective. Furthermore, urban space itself can be used as a storytelling device to reflect social exclusion, using techniques such as fragmented framing, restricted movement, or stark visual contrasts between different urban environments. These visual elements can highlight the physical and emotional separation between different social groups, making urban space a tool for both narrative and social critique.

Digital Technologies and Urban Space

With the rise of digital technologies, urban space in Chinese cinema is no longer limited to physical depictions. Filmmakers should explore how digital tools like virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and interactive storytelling can offer new ways to engage with urban environments. While these technologies provide immersive, non-linear experiences that challenge traditional storytelling, they also





offer fresh opportunities to explore the complexities of modern cities. By combining these technologies with traditional filmmaking techniques, filmmakers can create a multidimensional view of urban life that reflects both the physical and virtual forces shaping cities today. Examining how interactive media reconfigure spatial narratives in Chinese cinema could offer valuable insights into how emerging technologies are reshaping the way urban environments are portrayed on screen. Further exploration of Chinese films or experimental media projects that have already begun to integrate digital spatial narratives, such as *The Wandering Earth* (2019), would make this recommendation more concrete.

Exploring the Intersections of Tradition and Modernity

The tension between tradition and modernity remains a significant theme in contemporary Chinese urban films. Filmmakers can effectively depict this conflict by using cinematic techniques such as contrasting architectural styles—juxtaposing modern skyscrapers with traditional courtyard houses—or through soundscapes that highlight the contrasts between the noise of modern city life and the quietude of historical urban spaces. The symbolic use of urban ruins or abandoned buildings can also represent cultural memory and nostalgia for a past that is rapidly disappearing. Scholars like Zhang Zhen, who has written extensively on nostalgia and urban modernity in Chinese cinema, provide valuable insights into how filmmakers can approach this theme. By using urban space to explore these tensions, filmmakers can engage in a broader dialogue about the cultural and social implications of China's urban transformation, questioning how modernization reshapes both physical spaces and cultural identities.

In conclusion, these recommendations aim to encourage a more nuanced and sophisticated approach to urban space in Chinese cinema. By integrating specific cinematic techniques, exploring globalization through transnational narratives, amplifying marginalized voices, incorporating digital technologies, and addressing the intersection of tradition and modernity, filmmakers can create more compelling and reflective narratives that offer deeper insights into contemporary urban life in China. These efforts will not only critique the social, political, and cultural dynamics of modern China but also offer audiences a more comprehensive view of how urban spaces shape, and are shaped by, the forces of globalization, socio-political change, and cultural transformation. Finally, further research could expand on these recommendations by examining how emerging filmmakers engage with the evolving urban spaces in response to the changing socio-political realities of modern China.

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