

# The Research Methods of Spatial Memory and Local Cinemas History

## Taking Nanjing Dahua Cinema in the 1940s as an Example

Xiaoyan Yuan

Communication University of China  
Beijing, China

**Abstract**—The history of local cinemas is a micro-examination of the history of cinema, which explores the role of cinema in aesthetics, politics, and social institutions in a particular historical era. The cinema is not only a movie projection space, but also a complex space form composed of factors such as the subject of viewing, the acting mechanism, the film system, and the image text. This article will take the representative of Nanjing Dahua Cinema during the Republic of China as an example, and analyze the fate changes, the acting mechanism and the space form of the theater under the special historical social environment of the 1940s, hoping to discuss the research methods and significance of the history of local cinemas.

**Keywords**—*spatial cultural memory; Nanjing Dahua Cinema; local cinema history; cinema space form*

### I. INTRODUCTION

In the history, the Chinese cinema has become a space form with unique value that bears the change of Chinese culture and reflects the regional film culture. Film is a space object, and it provides its own space to replace the space of our normal field of vision. Since its emergence, cinemas have had unique spatial significance and space culture. Perhaps for movie producers, directors, actors, and audiences, cinemas have different meanings. No matter what kind of social function the film plays in any era, its ultimate realization is inseparable from the participation and interaction of the film audience. On the whole, cinemas have important research value in the integration of cultural background and local cultural context.

From a macro perspective, the history of cinemas belongs to the history of Chinese culture, which represents the historical evolution, cultural value and significance of Chinese cinemas as symbolic spaces. This research method focuses on the relationship between the spatial form of film and the social field. The emergence of the film signifies the prosperity of a new brand social field: the extensive expansion of the two-way interactive relationship between film and society, and the increasingly close relationship between film dissemination and audience psychology. Films such as windows and mirrors of society often form some kind of echoing relationship with the times. The social field of film is not static. With the change of time, the form and

meaning of the social field itself are constantly changing. With the expansion of film sociology research paradigm and research horizons, western film sociology research can be combined into many other subject areas: art history, art criticism, historical archeology, philosophy, linguistics, folklore, psychology, Anthropology, and cultural studies. As a result, the research paradigm of cinema history has expanded across disciplines.

From a micro perspective, the history of movie theaters belongs to the history of regional films, and it tells about the historical changes of regional film culture and the mechanism of local film performance and its social practical significance. The Chinese cinema is the product of the interplay and interaction between the film screening mechanism and Chinese regional culture, and the history of the cinema is also a strong stroke in the construction of regional film culture. People can study the history of local cinemas by recording other people's narratives about film history, field investigations, and other methods. They can explore the characteristics of cinema as a cultural spirit and urban imagery, explore the characteristics of the era of cinema construction and display, and analyze audiences and communications in various eras, analyze the way power ideology operates on the local film system. In this way, the cultural research significance of film local practice can be highlighted.

The 1940-1949 film brought together the interactive relationships of war, film, historical memory, and social structure. History and collective memory have prominent performances in the Anti-Japanese War movies. Because of their unique historical value and significance of the times, they have a rich appearance under the influence of the international situation, and have special significance in the history of Chinese film. This article uses the Nanjing Dahua Cinema in the 1940s as an example to examine the different impacts of the creation, management, and dissemination of films on social conditions at various stages of the Anti-Japanese War. Combining a diachronic study of the same theme film in different periods and regions of the social situation confrontation, this article reveals the interaction of art, ideology and commercial capital.

## II. HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND HARBINGER OF THE AGE

Nanjing Dahua Cinema is an important cultural space that witnesses historical changes and has gone through the vicissitudes of the times. On May 29, 1936, at the most prosperous Xinjiekou of Nanjing, the capital of the National Government, important members of the Nanjing Cultural Association gathered to celebrate the grand opening of the Dahua Grand Theater, which represents Nanjing's landmark buildings and the highest consumption level of citizens. Although it is named a theater, it is actually a movie theater that mainly shows Hollywood movies. (See "Fig. 1")



Fig. 1. Movie poster in Dahua Cinema.

On the opening day, Dahua Cinema showed the MGM Corporation's musical film "Birds Pay Homage", and its premiere won a sensation throughout the city. A few months later, Mei Lanfang came to Dahua Grand Theater to perform a Peking Opera repertoire, which was full of seats, which greatly increased Dahua's enthusiasm among the citizens. (See "Fig. 2") According to the 38th year of the Youth Film magazine, the Military Control Commission took over the four major theaters of Nanjing Dahua, Xindu, Capital, and National and their joint offices. According to reports, these four theaters were co-organized by Japanese invaders and Wang's pseudo-government in the era of enemy and pseudo. After the Anti-Japanese War, it was accepted by the Central Propaganda Department of the Kuomintang (KMT). Directors and supervisors are mostly agents of traitors and war criminals Sun Ke, Liang Hancuo, and Ma Chaojun.



Fig. 2. Dahua Cinema in the newspaper.

Dahua Cinema is a classic model of cinema in the Republic of China. Not only in Nanjing, it can be regarded as the theater with the highest standards, the largest scale, the most luxurious facilities and the best viewing conditions in the country during the 1930s and 1940s. Dahua Grand Theatre and Nanjing's World Grand Theatre (later renamed Yan'an Theatre), Capital Grand Theatre (later renamed Jiefang Cinema), Xindu Grand Theatre (later renamed Shengli Cinema) were known as the four major Nanjing theaters during the Republic of China. More importantly, the Dahua Cinema at that time was not only a place for film screenings, but also a place for communication and entertainment between the upper classes and aristocracy.

Under the special historical environment of the times, saving the country through film is a policy promoted by the Nanjing National Government. Commenting and introducing MGM Corporation's "Luanshi Gunan" (see "Fig. 3") shown at Dahua Cinemas, "Xiying" magazine said: "Anti-Nazi films depict children who are innocent and innocent, and the Nazi's viciousness can be seen from this." Dahua Cinema is an important place for the Nanjing National Government to implement the policy of saving the country through movies. Not only the film industry, but also the comic industry salvation association has held exhibitions in Nanjing Dahua Theatre.

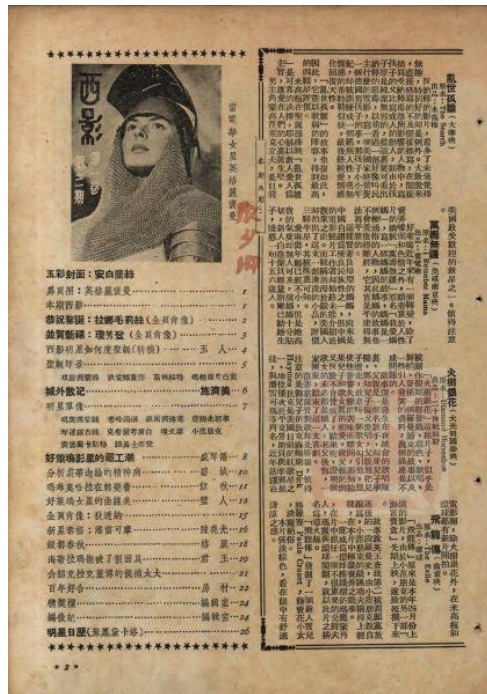


Fig. 3. "Luanshi Gunan"

From 1940 to 1949, the film screening of Nanjing where the National Government was located was very particular. The most outstanding theaters are Dahua and Xindu. Although they are comparable in terms of film, the facilities of Nanjing Dahua Cinema are even better. On April 23, 1949, Liu and Deng's Second Field Army liberated Nanjing, and Dahua Theater was confiscated and taken over by the army as bureaucratic capital, and it was renamed the Military Cinema. It has become an important place for military districts to convene conventions and daily spiritual, cultural, and entertainment activities for military members. Since then, until the 1950s, Dahua Cinemas mainly screened Soviet films and domestic films. Three of the top ten Marshals of the Republic left their footprints in Dahua. Liu Bocheng attended Dahua Grand Theater to attend important military region meetings, and he also watched movies in Dahua. Marshal Chen Yi made a situation report in Dahua. When the Czechoslovak military delegation visited our country, the Ministry of National Defense decided to hold a welcome party in Nanjing, and the venue is located in Dahua Grand Theater. Peng Dehuai had chaired the meeting here. By the end of the 1950s, with the approval of General Xu Shiyu, commander of the Nanjing Military Region, the Dahua Theater was transferred to the Nanjing local government, and it was soon renamed the Dahua Cinema. Today's Dahua Cinema is renovated, the grand occasion is still, and it is still with the old glory. As a landmark building of the city, it attracts citizens, tourists and movie fans. The destiny of Dahua Cinema and Nanjing, a cinema and a city are thus connected, showing a variety of spiritual features along with the changing times.

### III. FILM SYSTEM AND SPACE PRODUCTION

"Space production"<sup>1</sup> is a production process of social space, which confirms the process of transforming a specific place into social space in the process of Chinese film screening and film audience acceptance.

Nanjing Dahua Cinema reflects the production and change of this film space form. As a cultural landmark of Nanjing during the Republic of China, the grand opening of the Dahua Grand Theater in 1936 opened the cultural life of the Chinese during the Republic of China (see "Fig. 4") and profoundly influenced the concept of entertainment and consumption of the Chinese during the Republic of China. Regardless of geographical coordinates or spatial location, it has important social significance of cultural production. The characteristics and historical and cultural charm of Dahua Cinema are irreplaceable. Today, the transformed Dahua Cinema still blends modern architecture with traditional consciousness. The essence of Dahua Cinema's signboard facade and red ethnic hall are all retained, and the yellow terrazzo wall on the outer wall of the cinema is retained as a historical mark.



Fig. 4. Dahua Cinema during the Republic of China.

Since the Kuomintang's ruling Nanjing National Government achieved national unity, it has attached great importance to films with significant influence and gradually established a censorship management system. The original intention of the National Government for censorship of films was to stop chaos in the film field, to ban pornography, and to educate the nation and inspire people's wisdom.

The 1940s was an important historical turning period from the War of Resistance against Japan to the independent liberation of the people. The film played an important role in this special period. The article "Film Policy and Creation in the Great East Asian War" by Xu Gongmei (see "Fig. 5"), a

<sup>1</sup> See: [French] Lefebvre. Space: Social Product and Use Value. Bao Yaming. Modernity and Space Production. Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing House, 2003.



patriotic intellectual and film education advocate during the Republic of China, aside from fully affirming that wartime movies played a very important role in instilling ideas and manufacturing concepts, but also outlined several important significances of film creation during the war. According to Mr. Xu Gongmei, the disaster and meaning of war can be spread through movies. The film should unite the feelings of the oppressed nations, stimulate a sense of resistance, and arouse everyone's loyalty and cooperation in devoting themselves to the Great East Asian War. This is the policy principle and significance of wartime film creation.



Fig. 5. The article "Film Policy and Creation in the Great East Asian War" by Xu Gongmei.

#### IV. PERFORMANCE MECHANISM AND VIEWING MODE

As a specific social space, the movie theater condenses the audience's perception and historical and cultural memories, and engraved with the imagination of the Chinese nation's community and local collective consciousness.

With the development of history, Nanjing Dahua Theater has experienced an important turning point in its acting mechanism and audience's viewing style. 1927 was the point of change between the ancient city of Nanjing and the emerging art of cinema. The National Government established its capital in Nanjing in April of that year. The launch of the "Capital Construction Plan" has brought "the Nanjing Film Projection Industry into a Prosperous Period". With the completion and opening of the first specialized movie theater in Nanjing, the film in Nanjing really opened the prelude to the history of local screenings, which also promoted the prosperity of film as an industry and the independence as an art existence. The cinema is also a reflection of the new lifestyle trend in the composition of society.

The National Government in the 1930s and 1940s has formulated a set of fairly reasonable, complete and targeted film regulations, which was formulated with reference to the more developed countries in the western film industry at the same time in combination with national conditions. However, due to the constraints of objective conditions such as China's current national conditions, bullying by foreign enemies, and the existence of the Concession, the Nanjing National Government's performance of Chinese films was more of a form of supervision, and it failed to reach the core of Chinese film production. Film practitioners still dominate the development of the film market. The reason for the vitality of the 1945-1949 film activity is that it constantly emancipates and renews itself, constantly seeking a new growth point.<sup>2</sup>

In order to clarify the changing mechanism of the local cinema's acting mechanism and the audience's viewing methods, it is necessary to first analyze the generation factors and construction mechanism of the film's social field. It is necessary to study the interactive relationship between the history of Chinese local society and film culture, and then take cinema and local film history as research objects. The sociological theory is used to question the historical influence of the social field on the local film and the dual structure of contemporary meaning, the essence, concept and existence value of local film in the sociological perspective. This article hopes to rethink the interactive relationship between specific theme movies and specific social fields, and tries to provide a new perspective and more dimensions for the re-understanding of local movies.

#### V. SPATIAL FORM AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

After being introduced into China, the film has undergone a deep integration and localized transformation of the cultural context of China's various eras. The cultural practice of Chinese cinemas is also an important part of local film practice, which is closely related to the context of public space and urban imagery.

In the era when there was no television and ballroom, watching movies in the cinema was once the most important cultural life of the people. Therefore, the rise and fall of cinemas is a testament to the changing times. According to "Nanjing Cultural Records", Nanjing's earliest film was shown in 1904 at the Christian Education Youth Hall, 21 Baotai Street. The hall has horizontal benches that can seat more than 100 people. This is the prototype of the earliest theater in Nanjing. From the late 1920s to the early 1940s, Nanjing has begun to build formal cinemas on a large scale. Founded in 1927 and renamed Daguangming Grand Theater in 1931, the Chinese Grand Theater was once an early "cinema" theater that screened films produced by Universal Pictures. During this period, a number of more professional theaters were built: Nanjing Grand Theater, New Optoelectronic Theater, World Theater, National Theater, etc. were completed in 1929. Completed in 1931 are the Star Theater and the Capital Theater. Xindu Grand Theater and

<sup>2</sup> See also: Ding Yaping. The Trace of the Film: A Review of the History of Chinese Film Culture [M]. Beijing: Central Film Editor, 2005.

Central Grand Stage were completed in 1935. Later, Dahua Grand Theater (1936), Hongyunlou Theater Teahouse (1945), Jieshoutang (1947), and Star Grand Stage (1947) were built. Several of these theaters were designed by famous designers with unique styles, using the most advanced equipment in the world at that time. Especially the building itself, which has gone through the test of time, highlights the classic charm. Among them, the World Grand Theater, Xindu Grand Theater, Capital Grand Theater, and Dahua Grand Theater are hailed as "the four major movie theaters in the capital". Today, Dahua Theater is preserved and restored because it belongs to the cultural relic protection unit of Jiangsu Province, while almost no other theaters of the Republic of China in the same period exist. For local cinemas, the development of regional economy determines the scale and economic status of the local film industry, and regional conditions restrict the projection technology and dissemination methods of local cinemas.

#### VI. POWER FIELD AND TEXT DISSEMINATION

For example, if the film's social field is regarded as a diverse and organic whole, its generation mechanism may be considered as a production of social significance combined various factors such as social environment, power structure, cultural habits, capital market, media environment, and audience acceptance, not just the production of film art. In this regard, local films are particularly prominent, which may become a breakthrough for studying films that reflect social history and the times.

The concept of "field" restructures and examines the social field as a deep possibility condition of cognition, theory, system and practice. The field research method uses the unique field theory as an important tool for analyzing media.<sup>3</sup> A core concept in Bourdieu's sociological theory is "field". Film is a social field associating with multiple social factors and an open and dynamic aesthetic field. Fields such as movies are not only a field controlled by the political field through ideology, but also a field controlled by the economic field through the box office. Film is subject to politicized and commercialized fields, and at the same time exerts control over the audience field through its structure.

The national government's attention to movies in the 1930s and 1940s was because they had realized the powerful education effect of movies on the people at that time. Emphasizing the enlightenment function of the film naturally constitutes the core content of the nationalist policy of the National Government's film. Due to the great development of the new film movement, especially the film standards which left-wing filmmakers involved are becoming increasingly straightforward, it has produced a great social response. However, the KMT does not have strong dominance and authority. The Chiang Kai-shek government strives to maintain its authority, hoping to achieve its dictatorship in the form of "one party, one doctrine, and one leader", so it attaches great importance to party education. Film technology in a particular historical period has an important

influence on the dissemination of film text. The technical means of film photography, projection, printing, editing, recording, special effects, etc. are also the contents of studying the cultural symbol transmission of cinemas. The construction and transformation of the theater environment, the advancement of projection and cross-cutting technology and the improvement of sound effects have also changed the way audiences watch movies.

As a visual culture, film is not only used to define revolutionary historical narratives or to depict class differences, but also to map the ideology of power and governance, and urban planning. Film and other visual literature on urban development have been given sociological significance.

#### VII. CITY LANDMARKS AND CULTURAL SYMBOLS

Since the birth of Chinese cinemas, cinemas have become the cultural landmarks of cities in China, living in the city's bustling locations, and symbolizing the prosperity of citizens' culture and the style of the people's lifestyle. It is of great significance to the production and dissemination of cultural symbols. The effects of imagery on urban planning reflect the impact of Chinese urban visual culture on policy and development, showing the more complex uses and broader horizons of mass media.

An inspection of the Dahua Cinemas in the 1940s was a conscious reshaping of the city's image, which reflected the vision of artistically conveying urban policy to create new urban spaces. Chinese cinemas and cities are related to the cultural space in which people live, not only affecting people's views on the world and even human behavior, but also shaping the space in which people live. Prior to the founding of the People's Republic of China, China's art and politics were deeply intertwined. The potential power of art to define the country and influence the masses was recognized and promoted by the Qing Dynasty revolutionary Liang Qichao and literary giant Lu Xun. Japanese aggression in the 1930s and 1940s further convinced intellectuals and artists that their work needed to serve the country.

#### VIII. CONCLUSION

The history of local cinema in China has unique theoretical and practical value, which can be further expanded in cultural studies and interdisciplinary theoretical backgrounds. Although this kind of research is different from the grand narrative in the narrative of film history, it makes the film enter the film history through film acting and spatial construction. Only when film history is deeply combined with cinema practice and local film production in space production can it have social significance and value of the times. Although the history of local cinemas is a micro-examination of the history of cinema, it is possible to explore the role of films in specific historical eras in aesthetics, politics, and social institutions.

<sup>3</sup> See: [French] Bourdieu. *The Law of Art*. Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2011.

## REFERENCES

- [1] [France] Bourdieu. The Law of Art. Central Compilation & Translation Press, 2011.
- [2] Ding Yaping. The Trace of Film: A Review of the History of Chinese Film Culture [M]. Beijing: Central Film Editor, 2005. (in Chinese)
- [3] [French] Lefebvre. Space: Social Product and Use Value. Bao Yaming. Modernity and Space Production. Shanghai: Shanghai Educational Publishing House, 2003.